



Russia's Five-Day War

The invasion of Georgia, August 2008



MARK GALEOTTI

ILLUSTRATED BY JOHNNY SHUMATE

Elite • 250

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Author's Note

Translating out of foreign alphabets always poses challenges. For Cyrillic, I have chosen to transliterate names as they are pronounced, and have also ignored the diacritical 'soft' and 'hard' signs found in the original. The only exceptions are names that have acquired common forms in English – for example, I use the spelling 'Gorbachev' rather than the phonetically correct 'Gorbachov'. For Georgian, I use the usual conventions for transliteration.

Abbreviations used in this text:

AA	antiaircraft
APC	armored personnel carrier
AT	antitank
BTG	battalion tactical group
CGS	Chief of General Staff
FSB	Federal Security Service (Russian domestic security service)
GOU	Main Operations Directorate of the (Russian) General Staff
GRU	Main Intelligence Directorate (Russian military intelligence, since renamed GU)
IFV	infantry fighting vehicle
MANPADS	man-portable air defense system
MLRS	multiple-launch rocket system
MRR	Motor Rifle Regiment
SKVO	North Caucasus Military District (Russian)
SP	self-propelled
VDV	Air Assault Troops (Russian paratroopers)

Order of battle abbreviations:

Abn	Airborne
Arty	Artillery
Bde	Brigade
Bn	Battalion
Co	Company
Div	Division
Indep	Independent (unattached to larger formation)
Inf	Infantry
Lt	Light
Mech	Mechanized
MR	Motor Rifle
Recon	Reconnaissance
Regt	Regiment

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THE INVASION OF GEORGIA, AUGUST 2008

INTRODUCTION

When Russian troops crashed into territory contested by the small neighboring republic of Georgia on August 8, 2008, with the claimed aims of imposing peace and preventing ethnic cleansing, there was little doubt that Moscow would prevail – the only real questions were how quickly, how easily, and how far Russian forces would go. In the event, by August 12 Moscow and its South Ossetian and Abkhazian proxies were able to force Georgia to surrender both these rebellious provinces. The Georgians did not give up without a fight, however; some tenacious resistance on their part, and some serious blunders on the Russians', made this conflict rather less one-sided than some might have expected.

It was also something of a harbinger of things to come; in some ways, this five-day conflict was the first modern 'hybrid war'. This often misused term conveys the deployment of focused terrorism, armed proxies, cyber-attacks, and disinformation alongside conventional military power. The campaign against Georgia was fought on land, at sea, and in the air, being described by one Russian participant as 'a full-scale war in perfect miniature.' It was also the first clash between Western-trained (and, partly, Western-equipped) forces and modern Russian troops.

While, man-for-man, the Georgians were often skilled and determined, the much more numerous Russians were also able to use their advantages in the air and at sea to good effect. Nonetheless, it was the blunders witnessed in this war – from the way crashed communications forced generals to issue orders by mobile phone, to 'friendly fire' incidents, and an epidemic of breakdowns – that triggered serious reforms in the Russian military, but also foreshadowed some of the challenges that would still beset them in their invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

August 8, 2008: an enthusiastic Georgian soldier of the 2nd Brigade (note full-color patch) riding a tank into South Ossetia on the first day of what was then expected to be a brief, easy conflict. The tank commander wears an old Soviet-style padded helmet and overalls. (Vano Shlamov/AFP via Getty Images)



BACKGROUND

The genesis of this war lay not in the immediate needs of the Russian military, but rather in the complex historical and ethnic legacy of empires. Georgia has a long and proud history, and it was in the 12th to 14th centuries that this Christian kingdom was at its peak. However, its tragedy has long been to be a small nation lying at the crossroads of empires: those of the Persians, the Mongols, the Ottomans, and ultimately the Russians. As the Russians were expanding into the Caucasus region they looked for local Christian allies who could become vassals, and by the 1783 Treaty of Georgievsk they started a relationship with the eastern Georgian kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti, which soon led to formal annexation in 1800. This was always a fraught relationship, not least because, while both were Orthodox Christian, the Georgian church remained doctrinally and organizationally separate from the Russian.

The chaos of the Russian Civil War (1918–21) allowed Georgia briefly to declare itself independent.¹ However, the Red Army reconquered it in 1921, beginning 70 years of subjugation to the Soviet Union (which was ruled from 1924 to 1953 by the Georgian-born Joseph Stalin). Like the other ‘Soviet Socialist Republics,’ Georgia regained independence with the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. Nonetheless, freedom brought with it political instability, economic hardship, inter-ethnic violence, and growing pressure from a Russia that regarded post-Soviet states such as Georgia as part of its ‘Near Abroad’ sphere of influence.

In its quest to tame the Georgian government in Tbilisi, Moscow not only applied economic pressure but also exploited ethnic divisions. Georgia may be a small nation – with a total area of just 69,700 square kilometres (26,900 square miles), and a population of around 4 million, making it smaller than Scotland – but it is nevertheless home to numerous ethnic minorities, three of which agitated for autonomy or independence from Tbilisi. The Adjaraans of the southwest would be relatively easily subdued in 2004, but the Abkhazians of the northwest and the South Ossetians of the north were another matter.

Rather than to the Georgians, the South Ossetians looked towards their kin on the other side of the Greater Caucasus mountain range, in Russian-ruled North Ossetia. In 1991 Georgian police moved into the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali, in an attempt to suppress a local nationalist movement, and this sparked an outburst of violence that led to a wider, if undeclared conflict. In 1992 the South Ossetians signed a deal with Tbilisi that kept them formally inside Georgia but in practice all but independent, with the process to be guaranteed by a joint Russian, Georgian, and Ossetian peace-keeping force under the auspices of the United Nations. This would supposedly protect not just the South Ossetians, but also the ethnic Georgians of the 14 large villages in the so-called Liakhvi Corridor, which lay between Tskhinvali and the road north to the Roki Tunnel. In practice that area remained an on-and-off hostile territory for the South Ossetians, so much so that they built a



This hoarding in Dzhava, north of Tskhinvali, reads ‘Ossetia is Indivisible’ below images of two medieval warriors clasping arms. That the South Ossetians feel greater bonds of identity with Russian North Ossetia rather than with Georgia has been a continuing source of tension. (Viktor Drachev/AFP via Getty Images)

1 See ESS 69, *The Russian Civil War, 1918–22* (Osprey, 2008)

August 8, 2008: President Dmitri Medvedev (center) chairs a special session of the Russian Security Council in the Kremlin. To his immediate right is Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Council, who was generally regarded as Putin's eyes and ears, and, if need be, his enforcer on security affairs. (Mikhail Klimentyev/AFP via Getty Images)



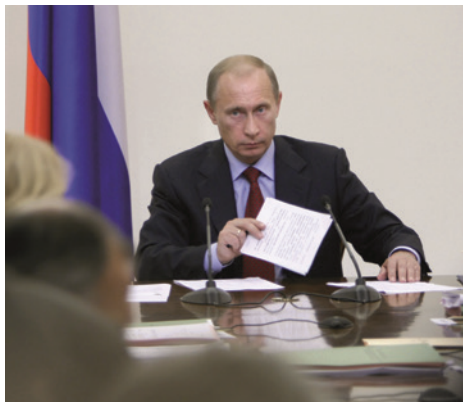
new road to the strategic tunnel to avoid it. Likewise, the Abkhazians fought a vicious little war against Georgian police and paramilitaries in 1992–93, tacitly supported by Moscow, which allowed Cossacks and other nationalist volunteers to join in the fighting. By September 1993, Abkhazia too was also effectively autonomous.

The Georgians never accepted this ‘mutilation’ of their territory, especially as it became clear how far Russia would manipulate these regions to bring pressure to bear on Tbilisi by encouraging attacks, especially by South Ossetians on Georgian villages, whenever it wanted to crack the whip. This would become much more of an issue after the election of Vladimir Putin as Russian president in 2000, and the bloodless reformist ‘Rose Revolution’ in Georgia in 2003. Putin was determined to restore Moscow’s regional hegemony, and would relish a chance to flex Russia’s muscles. The Rose Revolution, triggered by a disputed election, led democratic Georgia to adopt a strongly pro-Western foreign policy, with the new president Mikheil Saakashvili openly seeking membership of both NATO and the European Union. The Kremlin, which had already claimed that the revolution was inspired or supported by the CIA, looked for ways to demonstrate that it was not to be challenged in what it regarded as its rightful sphere of influence.

August 11, 2008: Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin holds a cabinet meeting to discuss the war. While President Medvedev was technically the head of state, there is no doubt that Putin was the dominant figure in the government and the conduct of the conflict. (STR/AFP via Getty Images)

Medvedev’s war?

Vladimir Putin’s second four-year term as President of the Russian Federation came to an end in 2008, and the constitution barred him from three consecutive terms. Although many expected that he would simply change the constitution, instead, in December 2007, he selected First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev as his chosen successor (or rather, place-holder). The essentially lightweight Medvedev was duly elected, but it soon became clear that he was to be president in name only. As part of the deal, Putin would become his prime minister and would continue to pull all the important strings, especially when it came to security matters. Nonetheless, the formal chain of command still led to the president (which would cause a few stumbles at the start of the August 2008 war). The evidence suggests that as early as 2006 a decision had been made that something needed to be done about Georgia, and that this would probably involve a military intervention. From that year on, Russia’s North Caucasus Military District began staging increasingly elaborate and sizeable military exercises, which both ‘wargamed’ an invasion and would



also provide cover for the eventual troop build-up.

When the moment finally came on August 8, 2008, it so happened that Medvedev was absent on holiday, and Putin was on a visit to Beijing. The president apparently dithered, and, according to the former Chief of the General Staff, Army Gen Yuri Baluyevsky, Putin had to call Medvedev on a secure line to give him ‘a kick up the backside’ and get him to issue the necessary military instructions. It may have been Medvedev’s signature on those orders, but this was clearly Putin’s war.

REFORMING THE GEORGIAN ARMY

Expenditure

It was not just that Mikheil Saakashvili was willing to challenge Moscow – he relished the opportunity. He made no secret of his desire to regain the two secessionist regions, by force if necessary, but he also appreciated that if Georgia was going to get Western support in general and NATO membership in particular, it needed to have the kind of modern military that could also take part in Western-led operations.

From the first, he adopted a two-pronged approach, both enthusiastically engaging with NATO and the West whenever he could, while also pouring resources into military rearmament at a rate that Georgia could not sustain in the long term. The defense budget increased from the equivalent of US \$18 million in 2002 to fully \$780 million in 2007 – a 40-fold increase that took it above 9 percent of Georgia’s GDP. Saakashvili and his defense advisors thought this necessary for both practical and political reasons. Practically, Georgia needed to ‘front-load’ spending in order to replace with NATO-compatible kit all the Soviet-era weapons and equipment it had inherited as its share of the USSR’s arsenal after that was dissolved at the end of 1991. Politically, it was a demonstration to a sceptical NATO that small, distant Georgia was serious about becoming a contributing partner to the alliance, and was not just looking to shelter under its defense umbrella.

Contingents for multinational forces, and Western training

Saakashvili’s predecessor, Eduard Shevardnadze, had sent a small contingent to join Operation *Iraqi Freedom* in early 2003. However, this commitment to the post-invasion peace-keeping force comprised only a team of combat medics and a platoon of special forces to provide them with security, for a total strength of just 70 personnel. Saakashvili was keen to make a show of his enthusiasm to work with the West and to demonstrate, above all to the Americans, that Georgia would be a worthwhile ally. He therefore rapidly expanded Georgia’s commitment: in 2004 it was increased to 300; in 2005, it grew to 850; and by 2008 most of the 1st Inf Bde was deployed to Iraq, taking the Georgian commitment above 2,000 soldiers. Additionally, there was a

The mixed nature of Georgian equipment is evident here, as a US-supplied UH-1H helicopter flies over Soviet-built T-72 tanks in the major base area at Vaziani. (Vano Shlamov/AFP via Getty Images)



Organization of Georgian infantry brigades

Brigade HQ (60 all ranks)

HQ Company (108, with 2x BMP-1 or BMP-2)

3x Light Infantry Battalions (591 each)

Tank Battalion (380; 2 tank cos & 1 mech inf co, with 30x T-72 & 15x BMP-1 or BMP-2)

Artillery Battalion (371, with 18x 122mm D-30 howitzers, 12x 120mm mortars, 4x ZSU-23-4 SP AA)

Recon Co (101); Signals Co (88); Engineer Co (96); Logistics Bn (288)

Total establishment strength: 3,265. (In practice, all brigades were under-manned to greater or lesser degrees. The 1st and 2nd Bdes were the closest to establishment strength, the 5th Bde the furthest.)

550-strong Georgian battalion in the separate United Nations Assistance Mission. This meant that some 2,600 soldiers out of an army of just 17,000 were in Iraq by 2008. That would prove a serious vulnerability when war broke out, but in the meantime it certainly contributed to warmer relations with the USA and an expanded program of military assistance (which, needless to say, was spun by the hawks in Moscow as ‘proof’ that Saakashvili had been little more than an American puppet all along).

In 2004, Georgia had also provided an equally tiny initial contingent to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan: 50 men from the 16th Mountain Bn, to serve under German command during the Afghan presidential election. (That unit later gave birth to the Sachkhere Mountain Training School, while its remaining personnel joined the Special Operations Command’s Ranger Battalion.)

The initial US Georgia Train & Equip Program (GTEP) had been introduced at the end of Shevardnadze’s time in office, in 2002. This was a relatively short and focused commitment, whereby 200 military advisors were sent to help train and equip four 600-man battalions over an 18-month period, at a cost of \$64 million. Personnel from the US 10th Special Forces

A

GEORGIAN MILITARY REFORMS, 1993–2015

(1) Infantryman, Abkhazian War, 1993

This soldier in field uniform exemplifies the degree to which the early Georgian Army still resembled its recent Soviet forebear. He wears the sand-coloured, summer-weight field dress introduced during the USSR’s war in Afghanistan and thus generally known as *afganka*, and carries a 5.45mm AKS-74 assault rifle, with the bayonet (which doubles as wire-cutters) on his sparsely-acoutered brown leather belt. The blue-and-white striped *telnyashka* vest was technically a distinction of paratroopers, but in practice had become widely used by this time.

(2) Soldier, 3rd Light Infantry Brigade, 2007

By the eve of the 2008 war the Georgian military was in the throes of a reform and re-armament program that had not yet removed all traces of the Soviet legacy, but was already showing the influences of Western and especially US militaries. This soldier from the 3rd Bde is wearing a uniform of German-style *‘flecktarn’* pixelated forest camouflage, and a modern Kevlar helmet (with a Woodland-pattern cover) instead of the steel Soviet SSh-68 widely worn through the 1990s. On the other hand, he is still armed with an AKM-74, and wears a load vest but not yet body armor. The national

flag patch on the right sleeve seems to have been adopted after Georgian forces began rotating through Iraq, and on the left sleeve he would be wearing a low-visibility patch showing the left-slanted spearhead-on-shield of the light infantry, with in its top right corner the Roman numeral ‘III’ identifying the brigade.

(3) Female soldier, 4th Light Infantry Brigade, 2015

Since the 2008 war the Georgian Army, like those of many smaller countries under pressure to maintain substantial forces, has increasingly allowed women to enlist. This soldier from the 42nd Lt Inf Bn, shown during the NATO-sponsored multinational ‘Noble Partner’ exercises in 2015, shows in the details of her kit the effect of Western assistance, and of Tbilisi’s determination to have forces able to operate alongside NATO. On her sleeves she displays three subdued patches, including the crossed rifles of the infantry on the flap of her left sleeve pocket, but note on the right pocket flap the sometimes controversial retention of the flag patch in its full colors. She is armed with a 5.56mm Bushmaster M-4 carbine.

(4) Georgian Army left sleeve patch

This colored version of the patch is often worn when not in the field.



Between 2002 and 2008, the Georgian military benefited from Western assistance, especially at small-unit level. Here, paratroopers are briefed by a British Army instructor at the Krtsanisi training ground outside Tbilisi in 2004. (Vano Shlamov/AFP via Getty Images)



Group ended up working with a range of Georgian units: the 11th, 12th and 13th Lt Inf Bns, the 16th Mountain Inf Bn, and elements of the Border Guard and the Interior Troops. This last was a paramilitary internal security force, a hold-over from Soviet times; it would be disbanded at the end of 2004, with its personnel transferred to the Army and forming the 4th Brigade.

Over time, the mission was passed to US Marine Corps and British Army trainers, but while it imparted invaluable training to both battalion staff and lower-level tactical commanders, it was really focused only on ensuring that these Georgian forces could operate effectively in Iraq alongside their Western counterparts. Saakashvili's assiduous courting of the Americans paid off, however, and when GTEP ended in 2004 it was succeeded by the Georgia Sustainment & Stability Operations Program (GSSOP), which sought to build on the existing progress. This brought additional training, especially for the 22nd, 23rd, 31st, 32nd and 33rd Lt Inf Battalions. However, it was still very much oriented towards small-unit leadership, which would prove a problem in the 2008 war (*see* p. 53, 'Analysis').

Rearmament

Meanwhile, by their own efforts, the Georgian forces were involved in a substantive reform process that saw NATO-standard weapons, tactics, and procedures increasingly adopted, even if alongside older Soviet ones. Such

was Saakashvili's spending spree, however, that while Georgia accumulated an impressive arsenal for its size, this was a hotch-potch of weapons, vehicles, and systems from a range of nations and eras. By August 2008, it had 120x T-72 SIM-1 tanks, upgraded by Israel with fire control and other improvements to a higher level than almost anything at the Russian 58th Army's disposal, but also another 60 older Soviet tanks including even some veteran T-55s. Its APCs and IFVs were a mix of Soviet BMP-1s, BMP-2s, BTR-60s, BTR-70s, BTR-80s, and MT-LBs – some

During the Georgian Army's commitment to the multinational forces in Iraq, which eventually amounted to the whole 1st Infantry Brigade, a US-supplied Humvee is seen at the contingent's base at Kut. (Ali Yussef/AFP via Getty Images)



Georgian Army order of battle, August 2008

Joint Staff HQ (Tbilisi)

Special Operations Forces Command

Special Operations Bn; Ranger Bn

1st Brigade (HQ Tbilisi, but deployed in Iraq)

11th Lt Inf Bn, 12th Lt Inf Bn; 13th 'Shavnbada' Lt Inf Bn, 14th Lt Inf Bn
Artillery Bn; Logistics Bn

2nd Bde (Senaki)

21st Lt Inf Bn, 22nd Lt Inf Bn, 23rd Lt Inf Bn, 24th Lt Inf Bn
Artillery Bn; Logistics Bn

3rd Bde (Kutaisi) – 'The Mamelukes'

31st Lt Inf Bn, 32nd Lt Inf Bn, 33rd Lt Inf Bn, 34th Lt Inf Bn
Artillery Bn; Logistics Bn

4th Bde (Vaziani)

41st Lt Inf Bn, 42nd Lt Inf Bn, 43rd Lt Inf Bn, 44th Lt Inf Bn
Artillery Bn; Logistics Bn

5th Bde (Khoni)

51st Lt Inf Bn, 52nd Lt Inf Bn, *53rd Lt Inf Bn, 54th Lt Inf Bn
Artillery Bn; Logistics Bn. (* Only inf unit in 5th Bde near full strength)

6th Artillery Bde (Gori)

1st Independent Artillery Bn (2S3 *Akatsiya*), 2nd Indep Arty Bn (DANA),
3rd Arty Bn (towed Msta-B), 4th Rocket Bn (BM-21)

Indep Combined Tank Bn (Gori)

Indep Air Defense Bn (Kutaisi)

Indep Engineer Bn (Tbilisi)

Indep Signals Bn (Saguramo)

Medical Bn (Saguramo)

unmodified, some with Czech, Israeli, or Ukrainian upgrades – as well as Turkish APCs. Czech DANA SP guns served alongside Soviet 2S3 *Akatsiyas*, using common 152mm ammunition. Although the US-made 5.56mm M-4 rifle was standard for units in Iraq and was beginning to be seen at home, issues over training, familiarity, and ammunition supply meant that during the 2008 war it was largely kept in arsenals, while Soviet-made 7.62mm AKM-47s and 5.45mm AKM-74s were used instead. In the immediate term, this eclectic arsenal was a recipe for confusion, and would have been difficult to combine effectively even in the best of circumstances.

Near Gori, a soldier from the Ranger Battalion of the Georgian Special Operations Forces takes aim with his Russian VSS Vintorez silenced sniper rifle. (Cliff Volpe/Getty Images)

Contradictory doctrine

Likewise, there was a fundamental challenge in planning a war in the midst of a redefinition of how the military planned to fight one. Georgia's National Military Strategy envisaged defense in depth and on a territorial basis:

Georgia will apply the principle of maximum resistance in the event of aggression. In the face of a military threat, all the resources of the Georgian State will be mobilized to reinforce our defense capability. Due to the small size of Georgia's territory, the limited operational space, and dispersed location of strategic



areas (cities, industrial centers, stations, lines of communications), retreat cannot occur. The limited resources of the GAF [Georgian Armed Forces] would make recovery of lost territory very difficult against a militarily stronger adversary.

The corollary was that the military ought to eschew developing the capacity for substantial offensive operations:

The Armed Forces will avoid decisive engagement with a militarily superior force because of the potential for the total destruction of the GAF and their combat capabilities. When necessary, the GAF will resort to asymmetric warfare, guerrilla tactics, and mobile units to maintain combat capabilities and cause profound damage to the adversary.

However, this was entirely at odds with Saakashvili's desire – and official government policy – to see the rebellious regions returned to Tbilisi's control, by military means if necessary. As a result, there was a constant tension between offensive and defensive planning, coinciding with an expansion of the military beyond what Georgia arguably could afford, and certainly beyond what it could reliably train and equip to a common high standard. If anything, the problem was getting worse: in 2006, the Georgian parliament voted to expand the military from 28,000 to 32,000 soldiers, with a planned further increase to 37,000 by the end of 2008. At the time of the 2008 war the GAF numbered some 30,000 serving personnel, all volunteers, of whom over 17,000 were in the Army, 2,000 in the Air Force, 1,200 in the Navy, and some 9,000 in various logistical, command, and administrative elements.

B

MODERN GEORGIAN MILITARY, 2000–2019

(1) Sniper, Special Operations Battalion East, 2019

In 2019 Georgia's Special Operations Forces were divided into Battalion East and Battalion West (essentially tasked with duty facing South Ossetia and Abkhazia, respectively). This operator is adjusting the sights on his Barrett M82 .50cal (12.7mm) anti-matériel rifle, a weapon of tremendous stopping power with an effective range of some 1,800m. He has thrown back the scrim veil that would otherwise cover his face, but it is a mark of national pride that, even amidst all the efforts to maximize the operator's camouflage, the flag sleeve-patch remains defiantly high-visibility. The two red bars painted at the rear of the rifle's receiver are unofficial 'kill marks.'

(2) Infantryman, 1st Light Infantry Brigade; Iraq, 2008

This soldier from the 1st Bde's 13th 'Shav nabada' Lt Inf Bn is on patrol outside the unit's base at Kut, near the Iranian border, shortly before the whole unit was hurriedly returned to Tbilisi to face a potential Russian attack on the capital. He is wearing US three-color desert camouflage uniform, and Woodland-pattern PASGT body armor, under a camouflage-painted tactical vest suitable for his weapon. Below the national flag patch he displays the subdued-format battalion patch (see 2a). Instead of the M-4 carbine that was beginning to be phased in, or the AK-74 that had previously been standard, he has followed the example of many other foreign troops in Iraq and adopted an AK-47, as the ammunition was locally plentiful and the weapon supremely reliable in the conditions.

(2a) Sleeve patch of 13th 'Shav nabada' Lt Inf Bn

Formerly the 113th Mechanized Inf Bn, this is one of the most famous units in the Georgian Army. It is named for the *shav nabada* cloak typically worn by medieval Georgian warriors (including, according to legend, St George, the nation's patron saint). It served in Afghanistan and Iraq; launched an amphibious assault on Gagra in Abkhazia during the 1992–93 war; and was one of the beneficiaries of the US Georgia Train & Equip Program. This low-visibility version of the patch shows the battalion's number below its symbol, a griffin.

(3) Helicopter pilot, 2010

At this date the Air Force was soon to become the Army Air Section, before being re-established as a separate command in 2016. Captain Ekaterine Kvlividze is about to start pre-flight checks on her UH-1H utility helicopter, but first is checking the magazine of her service-issue CZ-75 sidearm – a necessary precaution before flying a route close to the South Ossetian border. Captain Kvlividze became something of a celebrity; joining in 2007, and receiving the Medal for Irreproachable Service (2nd Class) in 2017, she was sent for further training in the United States. Subsequently she fell foul of the Defense Ministry, which dropped her from the pilots' training roster and transferred her to the infantry, at which point she resigned her commission.

1



2a



2

3



Additional armed personnel

The first post-independence military had been the National Guard, but this was disbanded amidst political turmoil and replaced with a more conventional army. Saakashvili revived it instead as the military reserve force, to supplement the regulars in territorial defense and emergency relief. At the time of the 2008 war the National Guard had only 2,300 embodied personnel, many of them involved in establishing and administering it. While on paper there were 45,000 reservists available, the war was so brief that although moves were made on August 8 to call up reserves and activate the National Guard, only a few elements were either already formed or could be stood up in time to get involved.

Finally, Tbilisi also disposed of armed security units, including the Interior Ministry's Special Tasks Department, in essence a public order and armed-response force; snipers and commandos of the Anti-Crime Department and Special Emergency and Operations Center; and the Special Operations Division of the State Security Service, at that time the counter-terrorism arm of the Interior Ministry. The Border Police of the State Border Defense Department also played a role in the war, as did the Coast Guard.

RUSSIAN & ALLIED FORCES

Forces in readiness and in place

The bulk of combat forces in the war would come from across the border: largely paratroop and special forces units, and battalion tactical groups (BTGs) from the 19th and 42nd Motor Rifle Divs of the 58th Army in the North Caucasus Military District. (For orders of battle on the South Ossetian and Abkhaz fronts, *see* p. 36, 'Days Three to Five, August 10–12'.) However, some units were already present on Georgian soil as peace-keepers, in Tskhinvali in South Ossetia and Gudauta in Abkhazia. These were part of the multinational Joint Peace-Keeping Force (JPKF), established under the auspices of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) following the hostilities of 1992–94, with Russian, Georgian, and Ossetian contingents.

These peace-keeping units were essentially mechanized infantry, but short of much of their heavier equipment. At the start of the war a single 500-strong battalion of the 135th MRR was based in South Ossetia, but the contingent in Abkhazia had been raised to its permissible ceiling of 3,000, including two battalions from the 131st Separate MR Bde, another from the 15th Separate MR Bde, a BTG from the 7th Air Assault Div, and two companies of *Spetsnaz* special forces.

South Ossetian forces

Under LtGen Vasily Lunev – a former Russian Army officer – these comprised some 3,000 soldiers, with the potential to mobilize another 15,000 reservists if given enough lead time.

Soldiers of a Guards unit parading at Russia's 12th Base at Batumi in Georgia, 2002. After the break-up of the USSR in 1991, a number of Russian bases in Georgia were retained for some years as bargaining chips, of which the one at Batumi was the last. Until their final withdrawal in 2007 the presence of these troops on Georgian soil was a constant irritant. (Oleg Nikishin/Getty Images)



South Ossetian order of battle

Army HQ

'Alania' Bn (joint North & South Ossetian
peace-keepers)

15th 'Zelim Muldarov' Special Purpose Bn

10th Motor Rifle Bn

11th Rifle Bn (motorized)

13th Rifle Bn (motorized)

Mountain Special Purpose Co; Sniper Co;
Guard Co

Signals Co; Engineer Co

Helicopter squadron

In 2004 Moscow had apparently wanted to build the often ramshackle local militias into a properly trained and organized force with a strength of 7,000 men, but this led to a flare-up of violence when the Georgian police intercepted nine trucks carrying weapons and ammunition sent from Russia. The initiative subsequently fizzled out, in part because of Tbilisi's unexpectedly tough stand, in part due to a change of mood in Moscow, and in part because of the level of theft of those weapons already sent.

As of 2008, the army was essentially built around four battalions (plus a company-sized 'special forces battalion') with aerial support, such as it was, from just three Mi-8 helicopters. The quality of these near-militia forces ranged from perfectly credible – for instance, the peace-keepers of the 500-strong 'Alania' Bn did try to live up to the standards of their Russian and Georgian counterparts – to unkempt and ill-disciplined. The Russians had continued to provide limited funding and some hand-me-down equipment, and while the bulk of the South Ossetian forces were armed with antiquated kit (including worn-out T-55 tanks, 12x D-30 122mm howitzers, and 6x older BM-21 *Grad* 122mm MLRSs), they also fielded a smattering of newer systems, including one T-72 tank, 4x 100mm MT-12 *Rapira* AT guns, 3x 2K22 *Tunguska* SP guns, and missile AA vehicles.

Beyond that, they were supported – at some times more ably than at others – by both armed police (including the 200-strong OMON riot police unit), and an array of local volunteer militants ranging from experienced veterans to unruly amateurs, and including a number of North Ossetians, Cossacks, and Russian nationalists.



Notably smart South Ossetian soldiers march past during an Independence Day parade in Tskhinvali in 2007. Most of the pseudo-state's forces were much less consistently equipped and 'squared-away' than this 'show' unit. (Kazbek Basayev/AFP via Getty Images)

Abkhazian soldiers outside Ochamchire. Note the dated kit: an AK-47 in the foreground, and a T-55 tank. (Genia Savilov/AFP via Getty Images)



Abkhazian forces

These, under Gen Mirab Kishmaria, were less numerous and more poorly equipped, but perhaps a little better organized. On paper, the province was administratively structured like a ‘little Russia’, with three Military Districts – the Central (Sukhumi), Eastern (Ochamchire), and Western (Pitsunda) – and an army of three brigades and several separate units. However, its total strength without mobilization of reserves (estimated at potentially up to 45,000) was just 2,200, and the nominal ‘brigades’ were in reality not even of regimental size. Their equipment was also distinctly dated, such as the T-55 tank, BMP-1 IFV, and D-30 122mm howitzer. Despite the presence of a handful of newer systems and weapons, a Russian veteran who served there observed that ‘in many ways, they looked like the Soviet army of the 1960s.’ Their air force and navy were no more impressive, comprising just five Czech-built L-39 *Delfin* trainers with a secondary ground-attack role, and a dozen patrol boats, respectively.

Beyond that, like the South Ossetians, they could also muster not only reservists but also enthusiastic militiamen, supplemented by Russian volunteers. In addition, the police and Border Guard played a secondary role in military operations.

THE STRATEGY OF TENSION

From the very first, President Saakashvili had signaled that he was no longer willing to accept the *de facto* autonomy of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In spring 2004, ostensibly to combat smuggling, he deployed police and Interior Ministry special forces into ethnically Georgian villages in South Ossetia. The predictable outcome was a series of low-level skirmishes between the security forces and some Georgian militants

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, here speaking to the press at the site of a rocket explosion in the ethnically Georgian village of Tsitelubani in South Ossetia on the eve of war. He is blaming Russia, and demanding an official explanation from Moscow. (Vano Shlamov/AFP via Getty Images)



Abkhaz order of battle (nominal)

General Staff Headquarters

Separate Special Purpose Detachment

1st Motor Rifle Bde

3x MR Bns; Tank Bn

2nd Motor Rifle Bde

3x MR Bns; Tank Bn

3rd Motor Rifle Bde

3x MR Bns; Tank Bn

Mountain Infantry Bn

Artillery Regt

Engineer Bn

on the one hand, and South Ossetian militias on the other. Over time, most of the police were quietly withdrawn, but they still made occasional patrols through the area to emphasize that Tbilisi did not recognize the authority of the regime in Tskhinvali. Unsurprisingly, relations between Russia and Georgia worsened in a vicious spiral, not least because Moscow began issuing passports to citizens of both the rebel regions, in effect making the claim that as they were now Russian citizens, it had a right to defend them. In 2005, Tbilisi adopted a new National Military Strategy, warning that

Russian military bases and peace-keeping troops within our territory have a history of provoking instability in the separatist regions, and remain a threat. Until their complete withdrawal, this issue will require continuous attention. There will always be forces in the Russian Federation that will provide active support to separatist regimes, using Russian bases within Georgia.

Increasingly, Saakashvili and his supporters began talking up the urgency of regaining these regions, not least because one formal condition for NATO membership is full control over one's own territory. In 2006, Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili even said that he would resign if he was not in a position to celebrate New Year 2007 in Tskhinvali. Indeed, Okruashvili would later claim that in 2005 a plan codenamed 'Tiger Throw' had been drawn up for the simultaneous reconquest of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, although this has never been confirmed. Shortly thereafter Okruashvili clashed with Saakashvili and was dismissed, but the damage had been done. An official working at the Presidential Administration in Moscow recounted that South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity promptly used Okruashvili's outspoken claims to lobby the Kremlin for more assistance, arguing that they proved that Tbilisi would soon attack.

In 2006, Tbilisi publicly expelled four Russians whom it claimed were working for the GRU military intelligence service, and this was regarded as only the tip of the iceberg. Georgian security sources suggested that Russian intelligence activity in the country had doubled in scale since 2003. The following year it was even claimed that a Russian aircraft had been shot down over Abkhazia, although this was denied by Moscow and never conclusively proven. On the other hand, the Russians and their Abkhazian allies did down three Israeli-made Elbit Hermes 450 drones being flown by the Georgians over the region. In November 2007, Saakashvili told a gathering of internally displaced Georgians

A sniper from the Georgian government's security forces guarding the ethnically-Georgian village of Ergneti in South Ossetia. The so-called Liakhvi Corridor included 14 large Georgian villages, which were frequently attacked by South Ossetian militias. (Vano Shlamov/AFP via Getty Images)





The pro-Russian South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity, flanked by bodyguards. An increasingly sharp critic of Tbilisi, Kokoity seems to have been delighted to try to needle Saakashvili into an imprudent attack. (AFP via Getty Images)

from Abkhazia that they would be back home by the next winter, and that there would be dramatic action ‘in the nearest future, I mean nearest months.’ Moscow and Sukhumi took note.

Saakashvili’s enthusiasm for confrontation allowed him to demonize his political rivals as Russian catspaws, and he sought to use the worsening relationship with Moscow to persuade NATO to back him. In April 2008 NATO leaders gathered in Bucharest, but, despite Tbilisi’s evident eagerness, they held back from offering Georgia (or Ukraine) a full Membership Action Plan, instead simply stating that at some future time ‘these countries will become members of NATO.’ In many ways, this was the worst possible choice of words. On the one hand, it further angered Moscow – increasing its incentive to make an example of countries that might be thinking of joining Western organizations – but on the other, although it gave Georgia no practical guarantees, it appears to have been interpreted by Saakashvili as a sign that, in a crunch, NATO or at least the USA would defend it. Whether this

was out of naive over-optimism or desperation, he was clearly convinced of it. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice recalled telling him in private talks ‘that the Russians would try to provoke him, and that, given the circumstances on the ground, he could not count on a military response from NATO.’ Saakashvili seems not to have believed her.

Never known for his patience, the Georgian president was not just making the restoration of control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia a

C GEORGIAN SECURITY FORCES, 2008

(1) Patrol Police officer, Kodori Gorge

One of President Saakashvili’s undoubted successes was a root-and-branch reform of a Soviet-legacy police service widely regarded as corrupt, inefficient, and unapproachable. The Police found themselves playing a significant (if often unimpressive) role in the 2008 war, both in occupying South Ossetian settlements and trying to hold the Kodori Gorge against Russian and Abkhazian forces. This young officer, based at Omarishara in the eastern Kodori, is equipped more for policing than war-fighting, despite his 5.45mm AKS-74U assault carbine; his service sidearm (observed here) is an Israeli-made Jericho 941 pistol holstered on his right hip. The standard service uniform has a black cap and trousers and a pale gray shirt. A white English-language title ‘Police’ is displayed on the left breast, and a single bronze star of rank on black shoulder-strap slides. The left-sleeve patch identifies the Patrol branch of the service – see also under (4).

(2) National Guardsman

The National Guard reservist force was hurriedly mobilized from August 8. Some guardsmen were already available to be deployed for the attack on Iskhinvali, like this man who had already been serving as part of the training cadre. He is armed with an AKM-74 fitted with a GP-30 under-barrel grenade launcher. His uniform appears to be US Woodland camouflage ‘battledress utilities,’ with matching helmet cover and tactical equipment vest, and his non-standard goggles suggest that

he has previously served in Iraq as a regular. He sports the national flag patch on his right sleeve and the National Guard patch on his left.

(3) Presidential bodyguard

No doubt considering himself very cool, this operator speaking into an earpiece microphone is a member of Saakashvili’s personal security detail during his ill-fated visit to Gori on August 11. Like many such personnel he has his individual choice of kit, including *flecktarn* uniform, and commercially-acquired sunglasses and black tactical vest. His weapons are a Glock 17 pistol in a cross-draw holster on the left hip of his vest, and, unusually, a 5.56mm Heckler & Koch G36KV. The appearance of these German assault rifles in the hands of Georgian elite forces caused a controversy, as the Economics Ministry in Berlin insisted that it had not issued a permit for their supply.

Interior Ministry insignia:

(4) Police cap badge

Oddly enough for a republican service, the coat of arms is surmounted by a crown. The central motif is essentially the same as that on (1)’s sleeve patch, but that has a white shield bearing a single red Georgian cross instead of this blue shield with crossed halberds.

(5) Border Guard sleeve patch

Subdued-format left sleeve insignia; these troops played a significant role in the fighting, including the attempts to capture Tskhinvali.





Snapshot of Russian and Georgian personnel facing off at a checkpoint on the Gori-Tbilisi road. The Russians (left) are from their peace-keeping force; the Georgians are a Police special forces officer wearing characteristic blue 'tiger stripe' camouflage uniform, and an Army soldier. (Dimitar Dilkoff/AFP via Getty Images)

of defense expenditure for ever, Saakashvili made a decision to move sooner rather than later.

He seemed not to appreciate that while his generals developed their plans for a lightning strike to take back the secessionist regions and defeat their rag-tag militias – relying on surprise, and the expectation that Moscow would waste crucial days making diplomatic demands and mustering its forces – the Kremlin was drawing up its own plan. It wanted the Georgians to throw the first punch, so that it could claim to be acting in self-defense. To this end, Moscow was not only actively trying to ratchet up the tensions – and needle Saakashvili personally – but also encouraging its local allies, especially the South Ossetians, to provoke Tbilisi.

Russia both increased its support for the rebel regions – in March 2008 it resumed economic ties with Abkhazia, suspended in 1996 – and prepared its forces to respond as and when Saakashvili's limited patience snapped. The Russians expanded their peace-keeping contingent in Abkhazia to its full permitted ceiling of 3,000 troops, including two companies of *Spetsnaz*, and paratroopers from 3rd Bn of the 7th Air Assault Div's 108th Guards Kuban Cossack Air Assault Regiment. At the same time, they appeared to neglect South Ossetia, leaving the peace-keeping force there essentially unchanged. They did not know whether Tbilisi was willing or able to take on both rebel regions at once, and wanted to encourage Saakashvili towards South Ossetia. Not only was Eduard Kokoity particularly anti-Georgian, and amenable to encouraging his people to attack Georgian communities near his border, but the Roki Tunnel on the Trans-Caucasus Highway (TransKAM), cutting through the Greater Caucasus mountain range in Ossetia, allowed for quick Russian reinforcement by land.

The Russians had also just finished one of their regular regional military exercises in the area. When this 'Kavkaz-2008' ended, they left two reinforced battalions from the 19th MR Div, kept on stand-by, just 30km (18½ miles) from the northern end of the tunnel. This meant that some 1,500 troops supported by tanks, self-propelled guns and an MLRS battery could deploy into South Ossetia within hours. Other units, including paratroopers from the 76th Pskov Guards Air Assault Div, were on 24-hour readiness, while plans for air attacks on Georgian strategic targets had already been distributed. While the Russians did not know precisely when Saakashvili would roll the dice, they expected him to do it, and their forces were ready when he did.

personal crusade; he also seems to have reasoned that time to do so might be running out. The West's recognition of the secession of ethnically-Albanian Kosovo from Russia's ally Serbia in February 2008 infuriated Moscow. More to the point, it began to be cited in Russian commentary as a precedent: if the West could unilaterally recognize secessionist regions, then so could they. The fear in Tbilisi was that Moscow might soon formally recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, and offer them security guarantees. Given also that Georgia could not afford its current levels

THE WAR

DAY ONE, AUGUST 8

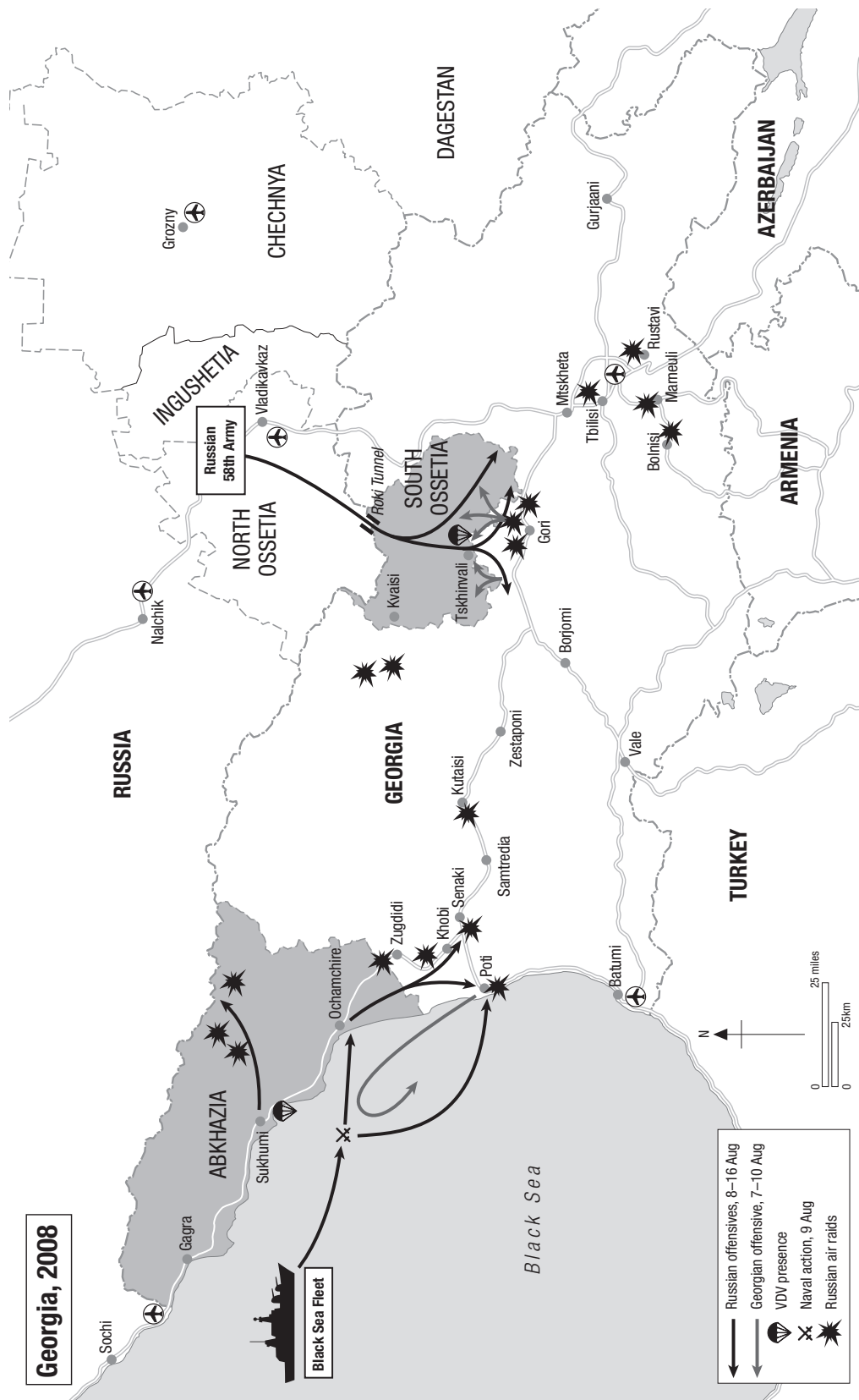
An upsurge of violence then saw South Ossetian irregulars, armed and egged on by Moscow, attacking Georgian civilians and government forces across the disputed border. There were artillery strikes, cross-border kidnappings, and sniping incidents. In some cases Georgians fired back, and on August 1, 2008, ostensibly in response, South Ossetians began shelling Georgian villages, in defiance of a 1992 ceasefire agreement. The same day, a Georgian police truck driving through South Ossetia was hit by two remote-controlled mines, injuring six policemen. The following morning Georgian Interior Ministry snipers began firing on illegal South Ossetian checkpoints, triggering a wider escalation into sporadic mortar, artillery, and rocket fire; six people died and 20 more were injured. After a week of claim and counter-claim, ceasefire and ambush, Saakashvili's patience snapped, and on the morning of August 7 he approved the launching of Operation 'Clear Field'. Moscow had got its war.

The Georgian plan

The Georgians counted on the advantage of surprise, and their qualitative edge over the relatively poorly-equipped and disorganized South Ossetians. The idea was to take Tskhinvali quickly, while other forces bypassed the city, broke or disrupted any remaining field forces, and rushed to block the Roki Tunnel. Tbilisi reasoned that the Russians would be deterred from reinforcing the South Ossetians either overtly or indirectly (by encouraging North Ossetian militants and Russian nationalists to join in) because they would be disinclined to pick a direct fight with Georgian regulars. Besides, the expectation was that within four days, before Moscow could have any substantial forces ready to deploy, the Georgians would pretty much have locked down the region. With the main settlements under their control, they could instal a new, friendly local administration, turn policing and mop-up duties over to a force of reservist soldiers and police, and present Russia – and the world – with a *fait accompli*. A plan to deploy 200 operators from the Special Operations Forces to seize or block the Roki Tunnel was originally developed, but was dropped at the last minute, in part because of concerns that any early infiltration would, if detected, tip off the Russians. This may have proven a fatal error.

Major-General Zaza Gogava

As Chief of the Joint Staff of the Armed Forces, Gen Gogava was the most senior Georgian soldier, and a key figure behind Operation 'Clear Field'. A Georgian nationalist in late Soviet times, he joined the Georgian counter-intelligence service's Omega special force in 1995, rising to lead the Special Operations Center's Counter-Terrorism Division in 2003, and the Police's Special Tasks Division in 2004. Later that year he was appointed to lead the Army's Special Operations Forces, and proved to be a passionate supporter of closer integration with the West (he himself had been trained in the USA). In 2006 he first became Deputy Chief of the General Staff, and then Chief of the Joint Staff. In this post he played a key role in the early generation of strategy towards South Ossetia. Following the defeat, in November 2008 – in what was considered by many to be a scapegoating – Saakashvili demoted him to head of the Border Police, a position he retained until 2012. He was succeeded as Chief of the Joint Staff by LtGen Vladimer Chachibaia.



The first stage would thus be the encirclement of Tskhinvali. Two mechanized brigades, the 3rd and 4th, would take the Prisi Heights east of the city and the village of Khetagurovi to its west, respectively, and then sweep on through the presumed-friendly Liakhvi Corridor to meet up at Gufta to the north. Having surrounded this town, they would take most of their forces on, racing along the S10 highway up to Dzhva and then to the Roki Tunnel, where they would secure the crucial P297 highway (part of TransKAM), which was the only route by which substantial Russian forces could reinforce South Ossetia. Meanwhile, police and forces from the Interior Ministry's Special Tasks Dept, supported by regular military units – artillery, a tank company from the 2nd Bde, and the Special Operations Group – would capture Tskhinvali itself, isolating but not engaging the Russian peace-keepers stationed there. Smaller forces of both Army and Interior Ministry troops, as well as mobilized National Guard reservists, would fan out to take other minor towns and villages.

Overall, the operation would involve some 12,000 Army and 4,000 Interior Ministry personnel. Given that the 1st Bde was absent in Iraq, this represented the lion's share of Georgia's operational forces; it would leave relatively little in reserve if the quick *coup de main* ran into trouble, but this seemed to worry neither the military command nor President Saakashvili.

Initial bombardment

At 2335hrs on August 7, Saakashvili telephoned MajGen Gogava, Chief of the Joint Staff of the Armed Forces, and gave final and formal approval for Operation 'Clear Field'. In Gogava's subsequent testimony to a parliamentary commission, he identified its aims (rather blandly) as:

1. To prevent any kind of military forces coming into Georgia from Russia.
2. To suppress the positions from where Georgian peace-keepers and Interior Ministry posts, as well as Georgian villages, were coming under fire.
3. To protect the interests and security of the civilian population while implementing these orders.



Cheerful Georgian troops in trucks heading towards the South Ossetian border on August 7, seemingly unaware of what was about to unfold. The national flag is prominent. (Vano Shlamov/AFP via Getty Images)

OPPOSITE

Map previously published in the author's *Putin's Wars* (Osprey, 2022)



Photographed at Kojuri in 2004, soldiers from Georgia's Special Operations Forces training for urban fighting. Note the AKS-74U assault carbines, which were in the process of being replaced with H&K MP5 SMGs and M-4A1 carbines. In 2008 elements of the Special Operations Command would be deployed to stiffen Police and Internal Security troops tasked with capturing Tskhinvali, the South Ossetian capital. (Vano Shlamov/AFP via Getty Images)

Georgian BM-21 MLRSs open fire on South Ossetian positions in Tskhinvali on the first day of the war. Their targeting proved to be fairly indiscriminate. (Vano Shlamov/AFP via Getty Images)



The Georgian forces were ready, and within 20 minutes of the president's order, just before midnight, they started to bombard Tskhinvali with more than 100 mortars, artillery pieces, and MLRSs from the 6th Bde under LtGen Devi Chankotadze. The plan had been for carefully-targeted strikes on strategic locations, but, unsurprisingly, the reality was much messier. The accuracy of the fire was often questionable, and, along with civilian neighborhoods, some shells hit the compound of the Russian peace-keepers under LtCol Konstantin Timerman – a provocation that Tbilisi had specifically wished to avoid.

Moscow immediately claimed that this was an illegitimate act of aggression. Despite some muddled communications in Moscow (*see* p. 26), the Russians had contingency plans ready to be triggered by just such an attack, and, at around 0100 on August 8, North Caucasus Military District (SKVO) commander ColGen Sergei Makarov activated them. The two battalion tactical groups from the 693rd and 135th MRRs, kept on stand-by 30km from the Roki Tunnel's northern mouth, totaled some 1,500 soldiers, 14x T-72B tanks, 16x 2S3 *Akatsiya* 152mm self-propelled guns, plus a

D

OTHER GEORGIAN FORCES, 2008

(1) Chechen volunteer

The Pankisi Gorge in northeastern Georgia is home to an ethnic Chechen population, many of them former rebels who fled Moscow's suppression of Chechnya's independence from 1999. A number fought as volunteers alongside the Georgians, including this experienced militant. He is wearing blue tiger-striped Kamysh camouflage trousers as issued to Russian OMON riot police, and a matching load vest, over an Italian Army-surplus Mod 75 olive drab jacket. He has adorned this with both a Georgian flag (obscured, on his right sleeve; *see* Plates A-C), and a Chechen patch; this shows the national wolf symbol in black on a green ground, above white/red/white/green stripes. He is throwing an RGN 'offensive' blast grenade, and as well as a slung AKS-47 he carries a sheathed Shaitan-M combat knife tucked into the top left of his vest.

(2) Lieutenant, Independent Combined Tank Battalion

This rather wearied commander of a T-72 SIM-1 tank is leading his platoon in the second push into Tskhinvali on August 9. He wears olive drab flame-retardant coveralls, with the battalion's simple patch on his left sleeve. The SIM-1 upgrade installed by the Israeli company Elbit Systems included everything from new GPS navigation to thermal-imaging fire control. These

represented serious improvements to the T-72, although they naturally proved less useful when the tanks were deployed (as many were) in the battered streets of the city without proper infantry support, leaving them vulnerable to RPG-7 ambushes.

(3) Georgian militiaman

Civilians, especially from the ethnically-Georgian villages of the beleaguered Liakhvi Corridor, supported the government forces or else fought their own small-scale war with the South Ossetians. Dressed in a Soviet Army-surplus SSO Partizan camouflage jacket and Gorka trousers, this old-timer seems to know how to use his Los-9 bolt-action hunting rifle chambered for 9x53mmR hollow points, and fitted with a World War II-vintage German Zeiss telescopic sight.

(4) Badge of Special Operations Forces

One especially prized trophy seized by a Russian scout of the 135th Motor Rifle Regt in Tskhinvali was this custom-engraved Glock 17 pistol, with the crest of the Georgian Special Operations Forces carved into the grip, presumably for a ceremonial presentation: a sword and cross patée superimposed over a crossed arrow and trident and a pair of wings.





Russian peace-keepers, identified by the blue band and yellow Cyrillic 'MS' lettering on their helmets, load an AGS-17 *Plamya* ('Flame') 30mm automatic grenade launcher. The early entry into the fighting by LtCol Timerman's peace-keeping battalion from the 135th MRR critically delayed Georgian attempts to take Tskhinvali. (Yuri Tutov/AFP via Getty Images)

battery of 9x BM-21 *Grad* MLRSs. Within an hour, the 693rd's BTG had started moving into the tunnel, soon followed by the 135th's and the rocket artillery. Their mission was to take and hold the South Ossetian end of the tunnel and then the road south to Tskhinvali, keeping them open for further reinforcement.

Confusion in Moscow

Given that the Kremlin had been anticipating – indeed, inviting – a Georgian strike, when it actually happened a remarkable degree of confusion reigned in the highest echelons of both the government and military. This

was not only because both President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin were absent from Moscow, but mainly because the General Staff's Main Operations Directorate (GOU) – its primary organ for planning and organizing operations – was actually in the middle of an office move. This was the result of vicious 'office politics' inside the high command.

Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, a civilian whom Putin had appointed to shake up the military, had a toxic relationship with his generals. He had already sacked the CGS, Army Gen Yuri Baluyevsky; he then also became suspicious of Baluyevsky's former deputy, and head of the GOU, ColGen Alexander Rukshin, and, by extension, of the GOU as a whole. He dismissed Rukshin in June 2008 – although the latter had played a crucial role in developing the plans for the Georgian operation – and took his time selecting a successor. Meanwhile, he also imposed a 40 percent cut on the GOU's staff, and ordered them relocated to smaller offices.

What this meant in practice was that when Georgian troops opened fire on Tskhinvali, most of the GOU's files were locked in secure packing crates loaded on trucks; half the 'officer-operators' (in Russian parlance) who should have been managing the war were either looking for new jobs or on leave; and the ZAS secure-traffic telephones in their old offices had



Ossetian troops, possibly peace-keepers from the 'Alania' Bn, engaging government forces. Like their Russian counterparts, this unit played a part in stiffening South Ossetian militiamen defending the capital. (Andrei Smirnov/AFP via Getty Images)

been cut off, while new ones had not yet been connected. Had this been a larger war, or had the Russians experienced major setbacks, this crippled chain of command might have had disastrous consequences.

As it was, military orders of the greatest secrecy were soon having to be transmitted by insecure civilian cellphones, and everything from targeting air strikes to arranging logistics was being micromanaged by the new CGS, Army Gen Nikolai Makarov, and his staff. Fortunately for Moscow, the operational plans had already been circulated, and in SKVO commander ColGen Sergei Makarov (no relation) and 58th Army commander LtGen Anatoly Khrulyov they had experienced, competent, and aggressive officers who were willing and able to take the initiative. A major task force was quickly activated, with elements drawn from the 42nd and 19th MR Divs brought to readiness, along with a battalion tactical group from the 76th Air Assault Div's 104th Regiment. Regiment-sized Special Designation Detachments (OSNs) of the 10th and 22nd *Spetsnaz* Bdes were also tasked. Although delayed, elements of the 4th Air & Air Defense Army were also to be deployed, especially the 368th Attack Aviation Regiment.



In one of the very few sorties flown before they were grounded by the deployment of Russian interceptors, a Georgian Su-25 launches rockets at South Ossetian troops just outside Tskhinvali. (Vano Shlamov/AFP via Getty Images)

The advance on Tskhinvali

By early morning on August 8, MajGen Gogava and his staff were heading to an operational command post in Gori, and the advance guard of the Georgian forces was already on the outskirts of Tskhinvali. There had been little to stop them: the South Ossetians had been unable to offer much counter-battery fire against the Georgians' guns and rockets, and the few Border Guard units between the invaders and the city were easily swept out of the way. For example, as the 42nd Lt Inf Bn, supported by a company of T-72 SIM-1 tanks, swept through Khetagurovi, the only opposition it faced were four cars of South Ossetian militiamen armed with SPG-9 recoilless rifles dating back to the 1960s. The tanks engaged and quickly destroyed them, thanks to the advanced targeting systems in their Israeli-supplied upgrade package.

Beyond such brief skirmishes and some sniper fire, there was little to impede the 3rd and 4th Bdes in their encirclement of Tskhinvali, and most South Ossetian forces in the area simply retreated into the city to join its defenders, who were mostly motorized infantry and militiamen. The Ossetian peace-keepers of the 'Alania' Bn, some 300 strong, wasted no time in shedding their pose of neutrality, and also joined them at the barricades.

Street fighting

The earlier shelling of the Russian peace-keepers meant that LtCol Timerman and his men were now instructed to support the South Ossetians 'to keep the peace.' As Georgian Interior Ministry forces advanced towards the city, supported by a platoon of Army T-72 tanks, they came under fire from the 250 Russian soldiers in the Southern Compound. In the resulting exchange of fire, one of the tanks was put out of action by an RPG-27 and the other two withdrew, though five Russians were also killed. The Georgian forces



In the Caucasus mountains, a convoy of Russian BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles makes a brief stop on the way to the fight, to allow artillery to clear the way of potential ambushes. (Dmitry Kostyukov/AFP via Getty Images)

operation against disorganized militia resistance than full-scale urban warfare. However, the South Ossetians, bolstered by the Russian and North Ossetian regulars, were better prepared and more determined than anticipated. While many had no more than light weapons and Molotov cocktails, they knew their city, and were willing to fight for it. In the fighting for the city center Gen Anatoly Barankevich, secretary of the South Ossetian Security Council and commander of the defenders, is reported to have personally destroyed a Georgian T-72, sending an RPG-7 round through the thinner armor on the rear of its turret and detonating its stowed ammunition. Two other T-72s were also hit by militiamen shortly thereafter.

The Interior Ministry troops were themselves relatively lightly armed, and were largely deployed in Turkish-made Cobra APCs. This 4x4 wheeled high-mobility vehicle was neither sufficiently armored nor armed (with 12.7mm NSV machine guns and 40mm grenade launchers) to achieve much in close-range street fighting, and several were knocked out with grenades and petrol bombs. As they struggled to make much headway, the Georgians decided to deploy regular troops that they had been holding in reserve, and 4th Bde commander MajGen Giorgi Kalandadze committed his 41st and 42nd Lt Inf Battalions. While two Georgian Su-25s attacked targets on the outskirts of the city, they were not sent to target defenders in built-up areas. For that close-support task, three of Georgia's small squadron of Mi-24 helicopter gunships began to be readied at Alekseyevka airbase.

The 4th Bde elements moved into Tskhinvali from the southwest, while mixed Army and Interior Ministry forces attacked along the Heroes and October Boulevards from the south and toward Stalin Street from the southeast. The influx of fresh Army troops, supported by more tanks, began to turn the tide, and by early afternoon the Georgians were in control of more than one-third of the city, though there were still substantial pockets of resistance, especially in the center and around the Russian compound. At this point, however, the first sign of Russia's commitment to the war appeared.

The turning-point

A pair of Russian Su-25s from the 368th Attack Aviation Regt arrived overhead, and proceeded to attack the positions of the 42nd Bn in the Dubovaya Gardens in the west of the city with bombs and rocket-fire. They could strike with virtual impunity, since the Georgian infantry had been deployed without AA assets; more than 20 Georgian soldiers were killed, but the psychological impact was more damaging than the actual casualties.

took another route to bypass the compound, but it remained a lasting irritant in their rear. Second-wave forces including another tank platoon then surrounded it. Sporadic fighting would continue all morning, with shells from the tanks' 125mm guns destroying the Russians' vehicle park and medical station, and forcing the soldiers to take shelter in bunkers, basements, and their boiler house.

The decision to leave the capture of the city largely in the hands of Interior Ministry paramilitaries was based on the assumption that this would be more of a pacification

The experience of coming under unexpected attack from the air, and the consequent implications for Russian involvement in the war, were enough to reduce the rest of the battalion to panic. They fled the city, leaving behind their heavy equipment and three tanks. This had a catastrophic ripple-effect on the other Georgian units in Tskhinvali. As word spread the story became increasingly embellished, until some were claiming that the entire battalion had been wiped out, and that more Russian jets were on the way. Despite attempts to rally them by field commander BrigGen Mamuka Kurashvili, the Georgian forces began to withdraw, often in poor order, and by mid-afternoon they had essentially abandoned all their gains in the city.

Extra troops were rushed to the scene; the rest of 2nd Bde had already been turned back from its deployment in the west to return to Tskhinvali, but had not yet arrived, so the final unit available in immediate reserve, the 5th Bde's 53rd Lt Inf Bn, was deployed alongside elements of the Independent Combined Tank Bn from Gori. (Of all the Georgian brigades, the 5th was the most severely under-strength, and only its 53rd Bn was truly operational.) However, it would take time to deploy them, and also to get a grip on the units which had retreated. At 1415hrs, President Saakashvili announced a three-hour 'humanitarian ceasefire', ostensibly to allow the militias to surrender and civilians to leave the city, but in fact to give his commanders a chance to take stock and regroup their shaken forces. The speed and impact of this first Russian response had thrown the whole Georgian operational plan into question. Meanwhile, President Medvedev was formally announcing the start of an 'operation to enforce peace' in South Ossetia.

Away from Tskhinvali the picture was mixed, but more encouraging. True, a unit of the Interior Ministry's Constitutional Security Dept had been repulsed by just a platoon of locals when it tried to take the village of Kvaysa in the east, but otherwise the majority of the small-scale operations over the



A Russian soldier runs past the body of a Georgian fatality in the outskirts of Tskhinvali, while 2S3 Akatsiya 152mm self-propelled guns move into firing positions. (Dmitry Kostyukov/ AFP via Getty Images)



Georgian troops hitch a ride on Czech-made DANA 152mm SP guns. The excellent mobility provided by its 8x8 Tatra 815 chassis allowed this artillery piece to 'shoot and scoot,' moving position after each salvo to avoid Russian counter-battery fire; only two were destroyed during the war. (Vano Shlamov/AFP via Getty Images)

border had been relatively successful, with a number of smaller settlements taken. But none of this mattered so long as Tskhinvali was still defiant, and if the Russians could push substantial forces through the Roki Tunnel.

The Russian ground advance

That was exactly what the 58th Army were doing. Given that the Georgian 2nd Bde was needed to reinforce a new assault on Tskhinvali, and the 3rd Bde would not get to the tunnel in time, the Georgians had gambled their limited and precious airpower in a bid to hold off the Russian advance. By around 0700hrs, elements from the 693rd MRR were crossing a bridge on the Dzhava-Tskhinvali road when they came under attack from four Georgian Su-25s. Their 250kg bombs all missed, causing no casualties and failing to damage the bridge; moreover, this encounter gave Tbilisi its first concrete information about the Russians' progress and strength, which was an unwelcome shock. As one junior officer at the command post in Gori reported at the time, 'No one thought the [Russian] ground troops would be so numerous and have got so far by then. My boss swore for five minutes straight.'

The Georgian pilots were lucky in that, since speed was of the essence, the Russian vanguard did not have AA vehicles, nor did they yet have fighter cover. Within an hour, though, the first Su-27 interceptors from 4th Air & Air Defense Army's 3rd Guards Fighter Aviation Regt – based at Krymskaya – were in range of South Ossetian airspace. When they were detected by a 36D6-M mobile radar near Gori, the Georgian command ordered the grounding of all their Su-25s. Although these rugged little ground-attack aircraft would have been of real value in the fighting to come, they would also be easy targets for Russian interceptors. Instead, they were dispersed and hidden, in order to reduce the risk of their being destroyed on the ground. Shortly thereafter, a Russian Su-25BM from the 368th Regt was shot down near the Zarsk Pass north of Tskhinvali with an SA-14 fired by South Ossetian militiamen, who, not having radios compatible with Russian equipment, had presumed that the Sukhois were Georgian.

Despite a couple of skirmishes on the way – it is unclear whether these were with advance parties of Tbilisi's special forces, or militants from remaining Georgian enclaves in the region – the advancing Russians suffered the loss of only one vehicle, a BMP-2 which broke down on the Gufti Bridge and had to be pushed into the river to allow the rest of the column to pass. Meanwhile, Russian airpower was continuing to make its presence felt. The attack on the 42nd Bn was just one of several launched against government forces around Tskhinvali. At the same time, Su-25s and Su-24M bombers were pounding targets in Georgia itself, including the town of Gori and the military base at Vaziani, where National Guard reservists were already being mustered. Later, the Russians would also start hitting airbases at Marneuli and Bolnisi. During 63 sorties flown on the first day, the Su-25s would lose only that one aircraft shot down by 'friendly fire'.

By the time that Saakashvili's 'humanitarian ceasefire' was meant to be coming into effect some 3,000 Russian troops were on their way to Tskhinvali, and the 122mm and 152mm guns of the 693rd MRR and the BM-21s of the 292nd Combined Arty Regt were being readied for action. They soon began bombarding Georgian positions around Tskhinvali, worsening the panic, and ensuring that by late afternoon the only government units still holding on in the city were the blocking force around the peace-keepers'

compound. Meanwhile, any hopes that the 3rd Bde could turn things around were dashed when it also came under air and artillery attack. Rather than risking being decimated even before reaching the city, the brigade instead opted to emplace itself around the village of Eredvi, east of Tskhinvali.

Interior Ministry forces had tried repeatedly to break into the city from the Nikozi villages to the south, but although they were able to make it into the southern Gujabauri suburb they could get no further. On that first evening of the war there was one last, abortive Georgian assault on Tskhinvali from the south, but it was a half-hearted affair. The 43rd Bn sent in one company with perhaps 20 tanks from the 4th and 2nd Bdes, from Khetagurovi west of the city – which thus lacked effective infantry support.

Given that the recon company of the Russian 135th MRR had already reached the city limits, Tbilisi was aware that, unless its forces were able to secure the whole capital quickly enough to entrench themselves before the main Russian force could arrive, they risked becoming mired in a close-quarters street battle in a hostile city, against an enemy enjoying the advantage of airpower and with reinforcements on the way. By late evening, as Russian armor from the 693rd MRR began to appear on the plains around Tskhinvali, Georgian forces lifted their blockade of the Russian peace-keepers' compound and began withdrawing. Most regrouped at Gori, some 30km to the south. With virtually the entire available Georgian Army now deployed on or just across the South Ossetian border, plans for a second attack were hurriedly drawn up overnight.

DAY TWO, AUGUST 9

Moscow strikes back

Having committed himself to re-establishing government control over South Ossetia, Saakashvili was not willing to give up quite yet, even though the initial plan had clearly failed. The Russian vanguard at Tskhinvali was no larger than a single Georgian brigade, and it was hoped that a more cautious and conventional assault (combined with international diplomatic efforts) might make some headway, and at least persuade Moscow not to send in any



South Ossetian militiamen clearing a village. Note the slung RPG-18 *Mukha* (Fly) disposable AT rocket; these were not in widespread use before the start of the war, but Moscow provided additional weapons to bolster the firepower of both its regular troops and its proxies. (Dmitry Kostyukov/AFP via Getty Images)

Russian soldiers setting up a 2B9M *Vasilyok* ('Cornflower') 82mm automatic gun-mortar on a hill outside Tskhinvali. Able to fire high-explosive, armor-piercing, and smoke shells to a range of 2,250m, this was used to bring fire rapidly to bear on Georgian forces while awaiting the arrival of heavier artillery. (Vano Shlamov/AFP via Getty Images)



more troops. The front line was still not far from Tskhinvali, and if the city could be taken there was a moral and political victory to be won.

On August 9, regrouped government forces under BrigGen Kurashvili moved cautiously north as day broke, following a brief artillery barrage. The 2nd Bde led the way, retaking the village of Khetagurovi from a small Russian screening force, then inching closer to the city, and meeting up with the 41st Bn at Upper Nikozi. At around 1400hrs, as the Georgian artillery renewed its bombardment, the infantry began to re-enter Tskhinvali from the south. Unbeknown to either side, this turned out to be at the very same time when a two-company force from the 135th MRR, accompanied in person by 58th Army commander LtGen Anatoly Khrulyov – the senior Russian officer in the field – was entering the city from the west.

The Russians blundered into the 2nd Bde's reconnaissance company (or vice versa), and after an exchange of fire the Georgians withdrew; but LtGen Khrulyov had been badly wounded by shell fragments. It soon became clear

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SOUTH OSSETIAN FORCES, 2008

(1) Artillery officer

Crouching over one of South Ossetia's handful of T-12 *Rapira* 100mm smoothbore AT guns, this artillery lieutenant turns to give orders to his crew. He is wearing Soviet Army-surplus Kamysh tigerstripe camouflage uniform and a plain SSh-68 steel helmet. The PM pistol in a cross-draw holster on his belt would not normally be carried when in field dress, but was not an unusual addition to give some self-defense capability. Although he displays no rank insignia, the sidearm and the leather mapcase slung over his shoulder are equally clear indicators of his status.

(2) Infantryman

Although the South Ossetian military has since standardized on Russian Flora-pattern camouflage battledress, in 2008 a range of old Soviet uniforms were still in use. This enthusiastic soldier is wearing a summer-weight KLMK Berezka camouflage oversuit, and RD-54 web equipment; his knit woolly cap is

definitely non-regulation. His rifle is an old-fashioned AKM-47. Like most South Ossetian soldiers at the time, he wears no badges on his field dress.

(3) Militia sniper

Many of the more effective South Ossetian fighters, especially in Tskhinvali, were militiamen like this sniper. Under his SPOSN SSO *Smersh* SVD web equipment he wears privately-acquired clothing. The 7.62mm SVD rifle was a prized weapon, and the fact that he has been issued one suggests that he may be an ex-Russian Army sniper.

(4) South Ossetian sleeve patch

Although this was not displayed in 2008 as widely as were Georgian insignia, the South Ossetian military did have a badge. It shows the national tricolor above an eagle reminiscent of the Russian one, but with only a single head. More recently it has largely been superseded by a simpler design without the eagle.



LtGen Anatoly Khrulyov

A career tank officer, Khrulyov had been the SKVO deputy commander from 2006, before his appointment to command the 58th Combined Arms Army. He knew the area, and had been central to the wargaming of intervention in South Ossetia during the 'Kavkaz' exercises. He had to relinquish the field command of the operation when he suffered fragment wounds in action in Tskhinvali on August 9. Russia has quite a tradition of 'front-line generalship,' as much because of poor communications and unreliable reporting up the chain of command as for reasons of tradition. Khrulyov was hospitalized in Vladikavkaz, while his place was taken first by South Ossetian Defense Minister LtGen Lunev, and then by the SKVO's commander, ColGen Sergei Makarov. After the war, Makarov would receive the Order of St George 4th Class, while Khrulyov had to be content with the less exalted Order of Courage. Nonetheless, in 2015 he was appointed First Deputy Minister of Defense and Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Abkhazia, in what was simultaneously a reward for his efforts in 2008, his installation as the instrument of Moscow's control, and a spur to the professionalization of Abkhaz forces.

to the Russians that their communications were simply not up to the task of coordinating operations in a complex urban environment. At one point, Gen Khrulyov even had to borrow a satellite phone from an embedded Russian journalist to give orders for his own relief.

The main forces then engaged each other, and the 2nd Bde's mortar fire, superior numbers, and T-72 tanks forced the smaller and lighter Russian element onto the defensive. The first reinforcements rushed into the city were light infantry – *Spetsnaz* from the 10th Bde, and the Vostok Bn (*see panel*). These were able to bolster the 135th MRR companies, who were beginning to falter, and the *Spetsnaz* (as well as the Russian peace-keepers, still holding their compound) provided targeting information for Russian artillery and for another pass by a pair of Su-25s. Although the Russian guns did suffer from counter-battery fire, they both eased the pressure on their infantry and blunted the 41st Bn's attack. Largely unsupported, the Georgian troops were ultimately forced to withdraw from the city by the late afternoon. They



Sometimes the Russian advance was hindered not by Georgian forces but by livestock. Here nonplussed soldiers pause their tanks for a herd of cows; on this August day they probably appreciate the chance for a break outside their swelteringly-hot turrets. (Dmitry Kostyukov/AFP via Getty Images)

The Vostok Battalion

The Vostok ('East') Bn, and the corresponding Zapad ('West') Bn, were Chechens who had joined Moscow's side at the beginning of the Second Chechen War in 1999, but later fell foul of the newly-dominant Kadyrov regime that Russia installed to run this troublesome region. Many in the Vostok Bn were supporters of the Yamadayev brothers from the rival Benoi clan, which had already started to suffer a series of controversial murders. The unit was largely drawn from veterans of the rebel 2nd National Guard Bn from Gudermes, who defected to the Russians and came under the patronage of the GRU. The Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov had tried to have it disbanded, but the GRU was reluctant to waste this force of experienced mountain fighters, and so kept the unit under its wing. In November 2008 the Vostok Bn would formally be disbanded, to placate Kadyrov, but the name would later be revived for a force sent into the Ukrainian Donbas region in 2014. Colonel Yamadayev was assassinated in Dubai the following year, and local police accused Kadyrov's cousin Adam Delimkhanov of being behind the killing.

had gained some tactical victories, but the unexpected speed of the Russian reinforcement and the weight of the artillery and airpower deployed had proven crucial.

Apart from the artillery duels along the front line, the Russians launched the first of what would be numerous strikes by *Tochka-U* (SS-21 'Scarab') ballistic missiles with conventional cluster warheads, initially against government forces in Borjomi and Kutaisi in the west of South Ossetia. Meanwhile, all that day Russian bombers had been hitting targets both on and behind the front line. Flying 28 sorties, Tu-22M3s from the 52nd Guards Heavy Bomber Regt closed the Kopitnari airport at Kutaisi by thoroughly cratering its runway, and also hit Gori. They lost one bomber to a Georgian air defense missile, but these raids, and the *Tochka-U* strikes, were crucial; they not only disrupted Georgian efforts to muster their reserves, but also delivered a stark warning that Russian airpower could hit targets anywhere in the country – including Tbilisi, if it chose.



Georgian government troops retreating to Gori. (Cliff Volpe/Getty Images)

Chechen soldiers of the Vostok Bn (see panel) – the beards are a giveaway, since normally Russian troops must be clean-shaven – being transported on BMPs through Dzhava. Under the patronage of the GRU, this unit was deployed to South Ossetia under LtCol Suleiman ('Sulim') Yamadayev (although at that time he was technically a wanted man in Russia, because of an arrest warrant issued by the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov). Around 600 strong, the battalion was organized as three companies in BTR-60PB APCs, plus an under-strength support company. (Dmitry Kostyukov/ AFP via Getty Images)



DAYS THREE TO FIVE, AUGUST 10–12 THE SOUTH OSSETIAN FRONT

Continuing Russian advance

Saakashvili's hopes of restoring government control over South Ossetia had now been completely dashed. Half of Georgia's tank fleet had been put out of commission, and its forces were giving up their last gains inside South Ossetia. Elements of the 3rd Bde that had taken the small town of Eredvi east of Tskhinvali now withdrew eastwards, while Interior Ministry special police abandoned the villages they had taken in the west of the region. By 1400hrs on the 10th, South Ossetia was essentially clear of Georgian government forces.



South Ossetian troops, a mix of regulars and reservists, keeping watch for a potential government attack. (Kazbek Basayev/AFP via Getty Images)



Georgian troops retreating towards Tbilisi on the evening of August 11. (Uriel Sinai/Getty Images)

There was no sense that this was the end of the war; rather, there were now serious fears that Moscow planned to use it as a pretext for an occupation of the whole country. A desperate Tbilisi requested that the USA organize an emergency airlift home for the 2,000-strong 1st Bde serving in Iraq; the request was quickly granted, but would take time to achieve. As it was, they would arrive too late to see action, simply joining the defense of Tbilisi against a direct attack that never came. Appeals for more direct military or even political assistance from the West drew little more than the usual expressions of grave concern.

Meanwhile, the Russians were adding to Tbilisi's fears by building up their forces. Some 4,500 more troops from the 42nd MR Div arrived through

Russian order of battle, South Ossetian front

19th Motor Rifle Div (+)

135th MRR (2x BTGs); 429th MRR (2x BTGs, 2x tank cos);

503rd MRR (2x BTGs); 693rd MRR (3x MR Bns, 1 tank bn)

141st Separate Tank Bn

239th Separate Recon Bn

481st Air Defense Missile Regt

292nd SP Artillery Regt

1493rd Separate Engineer Bn

344th Separate Maintenance Bn

42nd Motor Rifle Div (+)

70th MRR (2x BTGs); 71st MRR (3x MR bns, 1 tank bn)

417th Separate Recon Bn

50th SP Artillery Regt

Vostok Bn

76th Air Assault Div (-)

104th Air Assault Rgt (1 BTG); 234th Air Assault Regt (1 BTG)

98th Airborne Div (-)

217th Abn Regt (2x BTGs)

10th Separate *Spetsnaz* Bde (4 cos)

22nd Separate *Spetsnaz* Bde (1 co)

45th Separate Abn Recon *Spetsnaz* Regt (1 co)



A South Ossetian soldier during street-fighting in Kurta; note the white recognition ribbon tied around his right arm. (Andrei Smirnov/AFP via Getty Images)

the Roki Tunnel, including battalion tactical groups from the 70th and 71st Motor Rifle Regiments. They were followed by the 503rd MRR from the 19th MR Div, as well as more *Spetsnaz* from the 22nd Bde, and two BTGs formed by the 76th Air Assault Div's paratroopers. So numerous were these forces that traffic jams slowed their progress on the road to Tskhinvali. Meanwhile, ten Mi-24 gunships and Mi-8 assault transports from the 487th Helicopter Regt arrived at Tskhinvali's airfield. By the end of the third day there were more than 10,000 Russian soldiers in-theater.

Saakashvili formally announced an end to the Georgian operation, but the Russians made it clear that – at least for a start – they were committed to preventing his forces from being able to shell Tskhinvali. That the South Ossetian capital was just a few kilometres from government-held territory had once seemed an advantage for Tbilisi, but now it meant that the Russians had a pretext to extend the area under South Ossetian (or their own) control. Georgian forces began digging in, while sporadic artillery duels and Russian air attacks continued. The latter were stepped up during the night of August 10–11, belatedly destroying military and civilian radars at Tbilisi and Kopitnari airports, Gori, and Poti to blind Tbilisi's air defenses, and hammering

airbases. The Georgian high command rightly concluded that this was not simply harassment but preparation for a further Russian advance.

On the morning of August 11, a brigade-strength Russian task force formed from the 693rd and 70th MRRs and the 234th Airborne Assault Regt moved down the P24 highway into government-held territory. Despite some scattered small-scale resistance, by late afternoon they had reached and taken the village of Variani, some 15km into Georgian territory. Crucially, this was the site of a strategically-important government supply base. In a desperate attempt to prevent it from falling into Russian hands, the Georgians deployed all six of their Mi-24 helicopter gunships. However, while these all made it safely back to base, they only destroyed two trucks. The Russians brought up ZSU-23-4 AA gun systems and 9K37 *Buk* (SA-11) missile systems, and the Georgian gunships would not be sent into battle again.

Russian order of battle, Abkhaz front

15th Separate Motor Rifle Bde

43rd Separate MR Regt (peace-keeping force)

131st Separate Motor Rifle Bde

526th Separate MR Regt; 558th Separate MR Regt

7th Air Assault Div

108th Air Assault Regt (2x BTGs); 247th Air Assault Regt (2x BTGs)

1141st Artillery Regt

31st Separate Air Assault Bde (2 BTGs)

45th Separate Abn Recon *Spetsnaz* Regt (–) (1 co)

810th Naval Inf Bde (–) (2 cos)



Georgian failures of command

Appreciating the strategic importance of Variani, the Russians clearly anticipated a counter-attack, and, rather than seeking to press on any further, they began to dig in. This was logical, but it turned out to be a missed opportunity, as Georgian forces were in confusion and there was no coordinated response until late that day. This epitomized shortcomings in command at the operational level, which the war had highlighted (*see* p. 53, 'Analysis').

The political leadership also failed to demonstrate a capacity to get ahead of the crisis and fully appreciate the situation, which damaged the morale of troops who were coming to terms with the broken promise of a quick, easy victory against badly-trained militia. While the Russian force was advancing on Variani, Saakashvili had been visiting Gori, a strategic town on the road from Variani to Tbilisi. When Russian aircraft were spotted overhead – actually heading on a bombing raid to Tbilisi airport – his security detail hurriedly evacuated him. This premature and over-cautious departure was

The English-language banner carried by these demonstrators in Tbilisi on August 12 is a reminder that this was also a 'TV war', during which the Georgians tried – largely in vain – to use the media to mobilize international support for their cause. (Vano Shlamov/AFP via Getty Images)



Georgian troops man T-12 Rapira anti-tank guns just outside Tbilisi on August 13, preparing for a Russian attack that never materialized. (Uriel Sinai/Getty Images)

A Georgian officer of the Patrol Police looks on as 2nd Bde troops in their MT-LB APC withdraw from Senaki, facing the Abkhazian front. With the departure of this formation to reinforce the attacks on Tskhinvali, Interior Ministry forces were the main assets at Tbilisi's disposal in this theater of operations. (Dimitar Dilkoff/ AFP via Getty Images)



very public, and triggered rumors of an imminent Russian attack. Within hours, the garrison in Gori, based on the 5th Bde, began to leave of its own accord; most withdrew to Tbilisi, but some to Kutaisi in the west. Many of the officers initially tried to prevent this retreat, but when they could not get proper orders from the high command they opted instead to bow to the mood from below. As one major subsequently put it, it was 'better to keep my company and my authority intact to fight another day, than to try and fail to hold the men back.'

On August 11 the Russians seemed to be shaping up for a serious attempt to take Tbilisi. Their forces had continued to expand, reaching a strength of some 14,000 troops with the arrival of fresh units from the 19th MR Div, including more armor and heavy artillery. Meanwhile, the South

F RUSSIAN FORCES, OSSETIAN FRONT, 2008

(1) LMG gunner, Peace-Keeping Battalion, Tskhinvali

This Russian soldier is firing his 7.62mm PKM in the defense of the Russian Peace-Keeping Bn's Southern Compound against Georgian attack on the first day of the war. Over his fur-collared winter Flora-camouflage battledress he wears similarly-patterned 6B13 body armor. His status as a member of a UN-authorized force is displayed by the background color of his sleeve patch, and his blue-painted Kevlar 6B7 helmet marked in yellow with a partial band and the Cyrillic letters 'MS' for *Mirotvorcheskiye Sily*, 'Peacekeeping Forces'.

(2) Lieutenant, 135th Motor Rifle Regiment

The Russian peace-keepers in Tskhinvali and the first battalion tactical group driving to reach the city were both elements from the same regiment – the 19th MR Div's 135th Motor Rifle Regiment. As his column makes a brief pause on its drive towards the city, this lieutenant is sitting on the turret of his BMP-1 IFV and scanning the terrain ahead through a pair of Baigish BPO 10x42 binoculars. He is wearing Flora camouflage uniform under a 6Sh92 tactical vest, and has an AKMS-74 assault rifle slung across his back.

(3) Major, Border Troops, Federal Security Service

Following the ceasefire Russia's border guards, a branch of the

infamous Federal Security Service (FSB), were quickly introduced into South Ossetia, to 'assist' – often, replace – local security personnel. This major is carefully checking an American journalist's documents before reluctantly approving them. In line with common practice for Border Troops officers, he is wearing the FSB's distinctive green-crowned service cap (of the usual exaggerated Russian size) even with his SMOK M camouflage field uniform, which bears the single large dull silver star of this rank on the shoulder straps. The FSB Border Troops patch on his left arm is obscured here: a black diamond shape edged with green and silver, bearing the gold double-headed eagle above a scroll, displaying on its breast a sword-and-shield badge bearing a silver-edged black cross patée. The name of the service appears on his right-breast title, and the left one displays his blood group in case he is wounded. He is armed with an AKS-74U assault carbine.

(4) 19th Motor Rifle Division sleeve patch

The badge of the 58th Army's 19th MR Div – which provided the bulk of the forces for the invasion – reflects its heritage as having been based in the mountainous Caucasus region since the 1950s.

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A soldier of the Abkhazian Separate Special Purpose Detachment, wearing Russian SSO/SPOSN Partizan camouflage uniform and a khaki tactical vest, stands guard in the town of Gali in the south of Abkhaz territory. (Kazbek Basaye/AFP via Getty Images)

Ossetians were fully back in control of their territory. The Georgian government redoubled its efforts to win international support, although these were undermined by a wave of cyber-attacks presumed to be emanating from Russia. Such interference with communications had begun even before the start of the war, but was now stepped up dramatically, with many government servers being overwhelmed or infected. Internet traffic was blocked, the Foreign Ministry's website and e-mails were compromised, and Saakashvili's own site was defaced with images comparing him to Adolf Hitler. In what had become a characteristic of Kremlin cyber operations, while some of these appear to have been launched directly by state agencies (notably the GRU), others were from so-called 'patriotic hackers' encouraged or instructed by the Kremlin to launch attacks on their own account, and provided with ready-made tools and targets for the job.

Early on the morning of August 12, the Russians resumed a methodical and essentially unopposed advance towards Gori. By mid-morning they had established themselves on commanding heights above the city, where a battery of BM-21 MLRSs were dug in. A conventionally-armed *Iskander* (SS-26 'Stone') short-range

ballistic missile slammed into Gori's main square. While this had previously been a military staging-point, all the troops had by now left, but nine civilians were killed. Meanwhile, Tbilisi was bracing itself. The bulk of the remaining Georgian Army had rallied there and were digging in to defend it, joined by the first elements of the almost 2,000 soldiers from 1st Bde back from Iraq, who were flown in that day and driven straight from Tbilisi airport to the city limits. While volunteers were being armed and trenches dug, the international community was belatedly stepping up its calls for a ceasefire, at the very least.

Ceasefire

In the event, it turned out that the Kremlin felt it had made its point sufficiently. Just after midday on the 12th, President Medvedev announced that 'the operation has achieved its goal; security for peace-keepers and civilians has been restored, [and] the aggressor has been punished, suffering huge losses.' By 1500hrs, Russian artillery fire and airstrikes had ceased, and the war was effectively over. The following day the Russians would briefly occupy and loot Gori, which had already been abandoned by government forces. On August 15 Saakashvili grudgingly signed a peace agreement brokered by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and Medvedev followed suit on the 16th. The following day, the Russians would begin their withdrawal.



Georgia had only a very small defense-industrial base. Here, in 2003, workers are assembling Su-25 ground attack aircraft and Mi-8 helicopters in the Tbilisi Aircraft Factory – in Soviet times, No. 31. (Viktor Drachev/AFP via Getty Images)

THE ABKHAZ FRONT

The Kodori Gorge

While Tbilisi's focus had been on South Ossetia, the Abkhazians and Russians had spotted an opportunity. Initially, there had been uncertainty in Moscow and the Abkhaz capital, Sukhumi, as to whether Saakashvili would attempt to kill two birds with the same stone. The Georgian 2nd and 5th Bdes and Interior Ministry forces west of South Ossetia could, after all, as easily have been ready to drive northwestwards into Abkhazia. Hence Russia's reinforcement of its peace-keeping contingent, as well as the Abkhazians' decision to declare a state of emergency on the morning of August 8, as soon as the Georgians began their operation.

Meanwhile, Russia's 7th Abn Assault Div in Novorossiysk, further north up the Black Sea coast, was ordered to stand up three battalion tactical groups for deployment to Abkhazia. By the end of the day the first BTG had already embarked on landing ships and was steaming south, escorted by the corvettes *Mirazh* and *Suzdalets* and two minesweepers. For heavier firepower the missile cruiser *Moskva*, flagship of the Black Sea Fleet, began urgent preparations for action (*see* p. 50, 'The War at Sea'). Four more VDV battalions were later airlifted to Sukhumi, and the rest of the 7th Abn Assault Div would be transported there by rail, along a line that the Russian Railway Troops had repaired only that spring.

Early on August 8 the Georgian 2nd Bde, which Tbilisi had planned to leave deployed around Senaki near the Abkhazian border, was hurriedly ordered to redeploy eastwards to provide a reserve for Operation 'Clear Field'. This left their Abkhaz front guarded by no more than some scattered Police units, and confirmed that Tbilisi was concentrating its efforts on South Ossetia. Neither Moscow nor Sukhumi wanted to waste opportunities to break Georgia's small navy, provide distraction from the campaign in South Ossetia, and drive the Georgians out of the upper reaches of the Kodori Gorge – a strategic region that Abkhazia had long been contesting with the government, and into which Tbilisi had deployed security forces in 2006.

As discussed below ('The War at Sea'), the Russians used a mix of long-range missiles, the Black Sea Fleet, and ground attacks to deliver a devastating blow to the Georgian Navy, but there was relatively little that could be done to affect the Ossetian campaign, although an early airstrike on the 2nd Bde's base at Senaki did seriously disrupt efforts to muster reservists. Instead, the main Russian effort was put into supporting the Abkhazians' Kodori campaign. For this the Abkhazians deployed the bulk of their forces (which after mobilization numbered some 9,000), supported from the air by a few helicopters, and their three still-operational L-39 trainer jets fitted with unguided rockets and bombs.

By the afternoon of August 9 their forces were ready, and, after a day of artillery bombardment, on the evening of the 10th they began to move into the disputed region of the Kodori Gorge. That same day, Russian paratroopers from the 7th Abn Assault Div moved into the Zugdidi region south of the Abkhaz border. With a clear military advantage, they negotiated an essentially bloodless occupation of the area, and on the following day they took Senaki (from which the 2nd Bde had been evacuated). A reinforced company subsequently swung north to close the other mouth of the Kodori Gorge. Finding themselves boxed in, most of the Georgian Police and soldiers there laid down their weapons, and the Russian paratroops let them go. On the 11th the Abkhazians swept through the gorge, flushing out the few remaining pockets of resistance, even while Georgian Deputy Interior Minister Eka Zhgualadze was claiming that they were withdrawing as a 'goodwill gesture.' Only two Georgians died, and one Abkhazian (in an accident); by August 12 the gorge was essentially under Sukhumi's control, bringing this self-contained and largely bloodless clash to an end.

THE WAR IN THE AIR

The combatants

The Russians dominated the air war (although not always with great effect), but the Georgians did put up a brief fight. Again, there was an obvious mismatch between the forces at each side's disposal. Under the terms of the 2007 Strategic Defense Review, the Georgian Air Force & Air Defense Command, under BrigGen David Nairashvili, was to have confined itself to airspace surveillance and support for ground operations. This would have entailed scrapping its only real fixed-wing combat element, a squadron of 12x Su-25 ground-attack jets based at Marneuli airbase in the south. This had not yet been done, and the unit was to play a limited role in the early hours of the war. However, while an undoubtedly serviceable and robust aircraft, which had been flown to good effect in the conflict with Abkhazia in 1992-93, the Su-25 is extremely vulnerable to enemy interceptors or AA systems, and the Georgian squadron was quickly grounded once Russian fighters were in the skies, in order to save it to fight another day.

Beyond that, the Georgian fixed-wing inventory was confined to just 12x Czechoslovak Aero *Delfin* L-29 and L-39 trainers with a secondary ground-attack role, and a couple of small An-28 transports, none of which saw use in the war. They also had Soviet-era helicopters including 12x Mi-24 gunships, 4x naval Mi-14 antisubmarine/search-&-rescue helicopters,



and 15x Mi-8 transport and utility machines of various models, as well as 6x UH-1H ‘Hueys’ donated by the United States, and 2 acquired from Turkey in 2001. The helicopters, only some of which were serviceable, were mainly based at either the Air Force Training Center at Senaki, or Alekseyevka airbase on the outskirts of Tbilisi.

Russia made a point of hitting all three airbases – and, due to their poor intelligence, several others which had actually been abandoned – with both airstrikes and long-range missiles. A new command headquarters that had just been built at Marneuli was bombed three times on the afternoon of August 8 alone, by flights of Su-25s and Su-24Ms. On the 12th, the Russians also targeted the base with an *Iskander* (SS-26 ‘Stone’) short-range ballistic missile fitted with a cluster-munitions warhead.

Russia, by contrast, could theoretically draw upon its entire air fleet, although in practice Moscow relied primarily on the 4th Air & Air Defense Forces Army, which was essentially the SKVO’s air component. This comprised 2 bomber regiments, 3 assault aviation regiments, 3 fighter regiments, a reconnaissance regiment, a composite transport regiment, and 3 helicopter regiments, with a typical regiment comprising 2 to 4 squadrons.

Despite this massive superiority, their actual impact on the war was distinctly less impressive than this would suggest. In part, admittedly, this was simply due to the limited goals of their operations. However, it also reflected poor command and management at every level. Indeed, one aspect of the chaos created by Defense Minister Serdyukov’s vendetta against the General Staff’s Main Operations Directorate appears to have been that the new Chief of the General Staff, ColGen Nikolai Makarov, may actually have forgotten to activate the Air Forces at the same time as he ordered the

The city of Gori was repeatedly bombed by the Russians, and while the primary targets were military there was considerable collateral damage, as this apartment building demonstrates. (Cliff Volpe/ Getty Images)

The turning-point of the fighting in Tskhinvali on August 8 was heralded by attacks by pairs of Russian Su-25s from the 368th Attack Aviation Regt, which flew many of some 200 combat sorties by Russian aircraft during the Five-Day War. Here one of their Sukhois is launching rockets at Georgian Interior Ministry troops' positions on the outskirts of the city. (Vano Shlamov/AFP via Getty Images)



Ground Forces to move, and only belatedly made good his mistake when prompted. This may explain why the first expeditionary units were without air cover. Furthermore, Air Force command decisions were being made not in the field, but by ColGen Alexander Zelin, head of the Air Force Main Staff, by phone from his Moscow office.

This did not make for good and responsive command management, especially as many of the targeting decisions were either hamstrung by poor communications or misguided by out-of-date intelligence. Bombers were largely forced to use unguided 'dumb' munitions, and in several cases hit target locations which were no longer in use. Even where Air Force liaison officers were attached to Army command groups, it turned out they had no or only sporadic communications with the 4th Air & Air Defense Army

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ABKHAZIAN FORCES, 2008

(1) Senior lieutenant, Police

Just as the Georgians largely relied on police to secure the Kodori Gorge, Abkhazian police were also deployed alongside soldiers, ostensibly to establish Sukhumi's claim to the region. On his midnight-blue uniform this officer's rank is shown by the three stars and single red stripe on his red-piped black shoulder straps. He is armed not only with his standard Makarov PM pistol but also a KS-23M. The largest-gauge shotgun currently in use anywhere, the 23mm KS-23M (KS for *Karabin Spetsialny*, 'Special Carbine') was originally developed to suppress prison riots, and then modified for the Soviet Interior Troops. This ugly pistol-grip weapon is powerful and effective at close quarters, and can fire everything from buckshot to tear-gas rounds. The haversack slung over the officer's shoulder contains a range of ammunition as well as some basic rations, and he is drinking from an Army water canteen.

(2) Militiaman

The conflict was a good one for the Abkhazian militia, who could enjoy victory after hardly having to do any fighting. This youngster, celebrating in the Kodori Gorge – and carrying an RPG-7 and a belt of 'link' ammunition for a machine-gunner in

his unit – has not seen any action which might have dampened his spirits. If he had seen combat, he would probably be wearing a green armband or shoulder ribbon as a field sign to differentiate himself from the equally-casually outfitted Georgian volunteers on the other side – see (3) .

(3) Infantryman, 2nd Motor Rifle Brigade

Abkhazian troops were relatively more standardized in organization and equipment than their South Ossetian counterparts, although unit strength was far below what the designations suggested. This typical front-line soldier wears a tactical vest over his battledress, both in Russian Berezka-pattern camouflage, and sports the Abkhazian Army patch on his right sleeve. Nevertheless, the standard Georgian National Guard camouflage was quite similar, so the green recognition ribbon around his right shoulder is a prudent precaution. He is armed with an AKM-47 rifle, which was just in the process of being replaced with the AK-74. Propped up against the wall is an old-fashioned Soviet *Veshmeshok* canvas backpack.

(3a) Abkhazian Army sleeve patch

The patch worn by the Abkhazian military shows the Abkhaz flag between the lettering 'Abkhazia' and 'Armed Forces'.

1



3а



3

2



The distinctive lines of a Tu-22M3 long-range bomber. This type should have been all but impervious to Georgian air defenses, but one was shot down with an SA-8B surface-to-air missile on August 9 when, for unknown reasons, a carelessly navigated formation also dropped to a vulnerably low altitude. (STR/AFP via Getty Images)



headquarters in Rostov-on-Don, 800km (500 miles) to the northwest, which was actually directing the strikes.

Operations and losses

The bulk of the approximately 200 sorties flown over Georgia were carried out by Su-25s of the 368th Attack Aviation Regt, out of Budyonnovsk. As well as providing battlefield support in and around Tskhinvali and during the subsequent advance, they also raided Georgian airfields to prevent potential flights, including Marneuli airbase, and the test runway at the Tbilisi Aircraft Factory. No Sukhois were damaged in these raids, but at least three were lost to friendly fire. Overall, a combination of malfunctioning or ignored Identify Friend or Foe (IFF) systems, poor airspace management, and the presence on both sides of Soviet-built aircraft, created confusion on the battlefield. As US analyst Michael Kofman wrote, even though Tbilisi had begun buying Israeli Rafael Spyder-SR mobile missile launchers (with four already received) and Polish PZR *Grom* MANPADS, ‘Russian air defense was far more effective against its own air force than all the upgraded kit Georgia had bought.’

The first Su-25 was shot down on the evening of August 8 by South Ossetians who presumed it was Georgian, and fired a salvo of 9K34 *Strela-3* (SA-14) shoulder-fired AA missiles. Next morning another was hit with an SA-14 while strafing a Georgian force on the Gori-Tskhinvali road. With one engine dead, the pilot, Col Sergei Kobylash – the commander of the 368th Regt – was limping back to base when a second missile took out his other engine; he ejected safely, and was retrieved by a Russian search-&-rescue team from the 487th Separate Helicopter Regiment. It is suspected that the missile which sealed his aircraft’s fate was also fired by trigger-happy South Ossetians, as militiamen briefly claimed to have shot down a Georgian Su-25, and by then no government Sukhois were flying. The third Su-25 to be lost was downed by fire from a Russian ZSU-23-4 SP AA gun system guarding the Gufta Bridge later that same day.

While militiamen might be expected to have poor fire discipline, that regular Russian troops would fire on their own aircraft is quite an indictment of their training and communications – and ‘friendly fire’ blunders cut both ways. Also late on August 8, an Su-25 attacked a Russian military convoy near Liakhva, believing it to be a retreating Georgian force. Its rockets destroyed a fuel tanker and inflicted several injuries, but it was driven off when the Russian troops returned fire with 9K38 *Igla* (SA-18) MANPADS missiles.

The loss of one Tu-22M3 bomber was also arguably due to more than just good Georgian shooting or bad Russian luck. Early on August 9 a flight of these bombers was returning from a night raid when, for some unknown



reason, they descended from the relatively safe altitude of 12,000m to a risky 4,000m (13,000 feet). Given that the bombers were returning – in another example of poor tradecraft – along the same route they had taken when outbound on their raid, Georgian defenders were ready. A missile launched from a 9K33M3 *Osa*-AKM (SA-8B ‘Gecko’ Mod-1) system brought the Tupolev down near the village of Karbauli, 50 km northwest of Gori; only one crewman survived.

The Russians claim to have lost just those four aircraft: three Su-25s and one Tu-22M3. Conversely, President Saakashvili fancifully claimed that up to 21 were shot down, and MajGen Gogava put the figure at 19. The truth appears to be that Russian losses amounted to six aircraft, as two Su-24M bombers were also shot down. On August 9 one of these, from the 929th State Flight Test Center at Akhtubinsk, was hit while part of a three-aircraft flight suppressing enemy artillery near the village of Shindisi north of Gori. Three man-portable missiles were fired; two missed, but one hit and caused a catastrophic fire. The second was an aircraft thought to be from the 968th Research & Training Mixed Aviation Regt, which fell to ‘friendly fire’ on August 11 when Russian troops moving towards Gori launched multiple 9K38 *Igla* missiles at it.

It is worth noting that the Georgians’ quick decision to ground their Su-25s and disperse them in shelters meant that they lost none of them, even to the bombing raids on their airfields. They did lose three antique An-2 biplanes bombed on the tarmac at Marneuli, and four helicopters. Two Mi-24V gunships and an Mi-14BT were destroyed on the ground at Senaki airbase in the west when it was taken by Russian paratroopers on August 11, and another Mi-24, combat-damaged, crashed while trying to make an emergency landing at Kutaisi.

Even after the ceasefire the Russians actively kept the Georgians under pressure. Here, an Mi-24 gunship hovers ominously over a convoy of Georgian Police and foreign journalists just outside Russian-occupied Gori on August 14. (Chris Hondros/Getty Images)

Finally, the war also saw Russia's first substantive operational use of the Yakovlev *Pchela-1T* ('Bumblebee') surveillance drone, specifically intended for the VDV. It was not a particular success; the first crashed on take-off, the video stream from the second was so unclear as to be useless, and they were all noisy and clumsy. Colonel Valery Yakhnovets, who was responsible for its field testing in Georgia, did not mince his words: 'Its effectiveness is zero, and the Airborne Forces do not need it.'

THE WAR AT SEA

The war at sea was very much a sideshow, but, given that Moscow's intent was to humble Georgia rather than simply to defend South Ossetia, it is unsurprising that they took the opportunity virtually to destroy Georgia's small navy. The latter was essentially a coastal patrol force of various hand-me-downs, including gifts from the Ukrainian and Greek navies, with bases at Poti and Batumi. The day in 1993 when one of Georgia's only seaworthy ships, the ageing minesweeper *Gantiadi*, managed to rout a handful of Abkhazian boats was considered noteworthy enough to be celebrated thereafter as Georgian Navy Day. Of its 19 ships only 10 were combat vessels, mostly over-age and under-gunned.

Not having been a signatory to the Commonwealth of Independent States agreement over the partition of the USSR's naval assets, Tbilisi lost out on a share of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet, although Ukraine later gave the Georgians some patrol boats it had received in that process. The *Dioskuria*,

The naval combatants

Georgia:

Navy

Tiger-class fast attack boat *Dioskuria* (formerly *Ypoploiarchos Batsis*, in Greek service); sunk at Poti.

7x Zhuk-class patrol boats: *Akmeta*, *Ayety*, *Dilos*, *Kutaisi*, *Tskaltubo*, *P-204* & *P-205*; 3 destroyed at Poti.

Stenka-class patrol boat *Batumi*; sunk at Poti.

Matka-class missile hydrofoil *Tbilisi* (formerly *Konotop*, in Ukrainian service); sunk at Poti.

Coast Guard

Stenka-class patrol boat *Georgi Toreli*; sunk by ship-to-ship missile.

Lindau-class minehunter *Aeti* (formerly *Minden*, in German service)

2x Point-class cutters, *General Mazniashvili* & *Tsotne Dadiani* (formerly *Point Countess* & *Point Baker*, in US Coast Guard service).

10 other patrol boats (of which 2 destroyed at Poti).

Russia (Black Sea Fleet):

Atlant-class missile cruiser *Moskva*

Kashin-class missile destroyer *Smetlivy*

Nanuchka III-class missile corvette *Mirazh*

3x Grisha-class antisubmarine corvettes *Kasimov*, *Povarino*, & *Suzdalets*

2x Natya-class minesweepers *Admiral Zheleznyakov* & *Turbinist*

2x Ropucha-class landing ships *Tsezar Kunikov* & *Yamal*

Alligator-class landing ship *Saratov*

Moma-class intelligence collection ship *Ekvator*

Bora-class missile hovercraft *Samum*

Uda-class replenishment oiler *Koida*

Sorum-class fleet tug *MB-31*



a French-built La Combattante II/Tiger-class missile boat which had been in Greek service, was handed over to the Georgians in 2004 and became the Navy's lead warship. It displaced just 255 tons, and was armed with 4x Exocet MM38 antiship missile launchers, 2x twin Oerlikon 35mm automatic cannon, and 2x torpedo tubes. However, neither it nor the *Tbilisi* – which had launch tubes for P-15 *Termit* (SS-N-2) antiship missiles – actually had any missiles to fire. Otherwise, Georgia was forced to rely on repurposing a few civilian vessels with machine guns and light AA guns. At once too weak to fight the Russians, yet symbolic of Georgia's sovereignty and its place as a Black Sea nation, the Georgian Navy and Coast Guard were tempting secondary targets for the Kremlin.

Georgian Navy and Coast Guard vessels sunk at anchor in Poti by Russian Airborne *Spetsnaz* commandos. When the paratroopers left Poti after scuttling most of Georgia's small fleet they even took away captured inflatable dinghies, towing them behind their vehicles. (Louisa Gouliamaki/AFP via Getty Images)

Operations and losses

On the second day of the war the Russians revealed the scale of their planning. Back in 2007 they had secretly based a battery of *Tochka-U* missile launchers in the coastal Abkhazian town of Ochamchire. On August 9, two missiles fitted with cluster warheads were launched against the Georgian



After the Black Sea Fleet's initial deployment to Abkhazia, Russian warships regularly rotated through Sukhumi; these two Tarantul II-class missile corvettes arrived in late August. (Stringer/AFP via Getty Images)

The *Moskva* returning to its Sevastopol base in Crimea on September 10 after its brief excursion to the Georgian coast. The most powerful Russian warship permanently based in the Black Sea, this missile cruiser would be struck by Ukrainian anti-ship missiles on April 13, 2022, and sank while under tow on the following day. (Vasiliy Batanov/AFP via Getty Images)



naval base of Poti to the south. Five sailors died, but the main aim seems to have been disruption, and to encourage the patrol boats based there to head for the relative security of the larger base at Batumi even further south, where they would pose less risk to the flotilla bringing paratroopers from the 7th Air Assault Div and marines of the 810th Naval Inf Bde to Ochamchire for the Kodori Gorge operations described above. (When they arrived, it turned out that the harbor had become silted up, so the task force ended up having to disembark over the beach.)

On the afternoon of the 9th, Moscow issued a formal warning that the Abkhaz coastline was now closed to all shipping. The Atlant-class missile cruiser *Moskva*, flagship of the Black Sea Fleet, set sail from its base at Sevastopol, escorted by the Kashin-class missile destroyer *Smetlivy*. Meanwhile, the Nanuchka III-class missile corvette *Mirazh* and the Grisha-class antisubmarine corvette *Suzdalets* took up positions off the coast. Some consideration was given to unleashing naval gunfire in support of land operations, but it soon became clear that the Georgians would not be launching attacks on Abkhazia.

When four Georgian patrol boats sought to approach Ochamchire and the Russian landing ships that were standing off the coast, the *Mirazh* engaged them with its P-120 *Malakhit* (SS-N-9) antiship missiles. Although Tbilisi denied it, the Russians claimed to have sunk one, and this was probably the armed Coast Guard patrol boat *Giorgi Toreli*. (Insofar as a single missile engagement counts, this action was actually the Russian Navy's first true 'naval battle' since 1945, and the commander of the *Mirazh*, Capt 3rd Rank Ivan Dubik, would be decorated by President Medvedev.)

However, the crucial move would come from the land. Russian paratroopers moved south across the Abkhaz-Georgian border on August 10, initially in connection with the Kodori Gorge operations. Two days later a special forces team from the 45th Separate Abn Recon Regt – the VDV's own *Spetsnaz* – penetrated the port of Poti. The bulk of the Georgian fleet still lay at anchor here, but unmanned, because their crews were anticipating further air attacks. The Airborne commandos were thus able to board, mine, and sink six naval and Coast Guard vessels, including the (potentially) most



A Georgian soldier jumps from a quadbike as Russian rockets hit a convoy falling back from Gori on August 11. The innovative use of such fast and highly mobile vehicles to move AA and AT teams around the battlefield was an example of the Georgians' capacity to innovate. (Dimitar Dilkoff/AFP via Getty Images)

powerful assets, the fast missile boats *Tbilisi* and *Dioscuria*. The majority of the Georgian Navy had thus been destroyed, and in 2009 the remainder was absorbed into the Coast Guard.

ANALYSIS

Summary

This conflict was essentially a badly-planned Georgian attack, falling into a carefully-orchestrated Russian trap. In 2012 Vladimir Putin would claim that he had known about the 'potential Georgian aggression' three days beforehand, and had been getting daily reports about Tbilisi's preparations for a move into South Ossetia. Whether or not this was true, Moscow certainly had a contingency plan in place which Tbilisi seems not to have anticipated, and the outcome of the war could never have been in doubt; after all, the 58th Army alone was 70,000 strong. On the other hand, especially at its outset, this was not such a David-vs-Goliath fight as might be suggested by simply glancing at a map, or comparing the total tallies of equipment and manpower. In the first days, Russian forces did not outnumber the Georgians on the South Ossetian front, and their operations were often disjointed and clumsy. Their dominance of the sea had no bearing on their victory in South Ossetia; nor did they use their greatly superior airpower in an especially effective manner. In hard fact, neither side in the Five-Day War especially covered themselves with glory.

Georgia

Crucially, the crisis had caught the Georgian military in mid-reform, still harboring old Soviet attitudes – especially among some of the more senior formation and unit commanders – and not yet having adopted Western approaches to operational command. On a tactical level the Georgians often fought bravely and well, and also showed clear evidence of the Western

A Georgian soldier with an AK-74 and an RPG-22 disposable AT rocket (and accompanied by a pup) mans a defensive position on the Tbilisi road. Georgian morale throughout the war ranged from the stubborn and daring all the way to fragile. (Uriel Sinai /Getty Images)



training assistance that many units had received. One US officer who had only recently left the service, and who was in the country at the time on business, said that 'The young guys knew what they were doing as well as any of ours; it was their senior commanders who were holding them back.' Western training had been geared largely towards NCOs and junior officers, who were in essence being prepared for operations in Iraq under US orders. There simply was no new generation of senior officers capable of coordinating large-scale operations effectively, and this weakness quickly became clear.

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RUSSIAN FORCES, ABKHAZ FRONT, 2008

(1) Captain, 810th Naval Infantry Brigade

This marine captain is leading the first tactical team from the Baltic Fleet's 810th Naval Inf Bde to disembark at Ochamchire. Under the Naval Infantry's standard-pattern camouflage field uniform he wears their trademark black-and-white striped vest, and, as this is not a 'hot' landing, he is also sporting their black beret rather than a helmet. His rank is indicated by the hardly-visible four dull gold stars on his shoulder straps (two spaced vertically above a horizontal pair). On his right sleeve are the brigade patch (showing a bison in right profile superimposed on the Russian Navy's St Andrew's cross), above the Naval Infantry patch of a gold anchor on a red-rimmed black disc. He has an R-126 tactical radio slung on his back, with a headset microphone, but is nonetheless armed with an AKS-74 rifle with double-taped magazines.

(2) Sniper, 45th Separate Airborne Reconnaissance Spetsnaz Regiment

This marksman from the VDV's elite special forces unit is taking part in the essentially uncontested seizure of the port of Poti. Over his Flora-pattern field dress he is wearing 6B13 body armor, with the collar fully raised. He is armed with the SVV Vintorez 'thread-cutter', a specialized weapon with integral sound-suppressor ('silencer') and PSO-1 sight.

(3) Senior lieutenant, Navy shore liaison officer

In case the Georgians sought to attack the Abkhazians, some

thought had been given to supporting ground operations with naval gunfire from the twin-barrel AK-130 130mm rapid-fire guns on the *Moskva* and the 76mm AK-726 on the *Smetlivy*; in the event this proved unnecessary. Nonetheless, this Russian Navy officer attached temporarily to the Abkhazian Defense Ministry in Sukhumi is going over potential scenarios with local officers. He wears the usual Russian Navy dark blue 'ship suit', with his rank denoted by the shoulder boards and forearm insignia, and a simple *pilotka* sidecap with the naval badge instead of his officer's service cap. The patch on his right shoulder shows that he is from the *Moskva*'s crew, while the titles on his right and left breast read 'Armed Forces of Russia' and his name, respectively. As he is technically operating in a combat zone he has been issued a 9mm pistol, carried holstered on his hip.

Black Sea Fleet sleeve patches:

(4) The general patch of the Black Sea Fleet.

(5) The ship patch for the BDK (Large Landing Ship) *Tsezar Kunikov*, one of the two Ropucha I-class ships that carried paratroopers and marines to Ochamchire. From top to bottom, the lettering reads 'Russia', above a profile of the ship picked out in gold against the Navy's St Andrew's Cross flag; below this, 'BDK Ts. Kunikov'; 'Sevastopol' (its base); and below the anchor, 'Black Sea Fleet'.



A Russian armored convoy on the road to Tbilisi is supported by a gun-truck mounting a ZU-23 double-barrel 23mm AA gun, which could as easily be used to rake hilltops and buildings. (Uriel Sinai/Getty Images)



Under the shock of unexpected setbacks morale sometimes proved brittle, but many Georgian soldiers fought tenaciously and effectively, generating imaginative responses to the new threats. For example, to try to counter Russian airpower in light of the relative vulnerability of Georgia's heavier systems (especially once Russia began to target radars), they began deploying two-man teams in quad bikes and similar light vehicles, one of them armed with a MANPADS or AT rockets. These were used especially to provide some cover for tank units which were deployed – as all too often they were – without regular infantry support.

Not only did the Georgians suffer some 2,000 casualties during the fighting – including 182 military dead and 188 civilians – but the losses to Russia's looting of equipment and stores exceeded those in combat. All told, Georgia lost dozens of tanks and other AFVs, some damaged and abandoned on the battlefield, others captured in lost bases such as Poti, Variani, and Senaki. According to Moscow, they seized 5x *Osa* (SA-8 'Gecko') SP AA missile systems, 15x BMP-2 IFVs, 2x DANA SP 152mm guns, several D-30 122mm howitzers, and numbers of US-supplied Humvees and Turkish-made Cobra APCs. According to Georgia's MajGen Gogava, the Russians also seized 2x modernized T-72 SIM-1 tanks at the base at Senaki, as well as 2x *Buk* (SA-11) AA defense systems – although the latter were apparently intercepted and destroyed by Georgian Police commandos while being moved to Abkhazia. The plunder also included some 1,500 small arms, among them 764 M-16/M-4 rifles.

Predictably enough, President Saakashvili would later try to spin defeat as a near-victory, claiming that 'the Russian 58th Army was actually burned by the 4th [Georgian] Brigade'. While this was obviously untrue, nevertheless Moscow was not exulting in its victory. It was hardly surprising that it had won against a country one-twentieth of its size, and where it stuck to limited and achievable objectives. But what quickly became clear was that it had not done anywhere near as well as it should have.

Russia

For Moscow, the story of the war was one of a clear political victory, marred by a revelation of the military's deep structural flaws. The degree to which



Russian artillery in the South Ossetian town of Dzhava fires on Georgian positions on August 9. While the Russians could deploy large amounts of firepower, their key problem was choosing where to target it, since their intelligence was anything but 'real-time'. (Dmitry Kostyukov/AFP via Getty Images)

the Russian high command had managed to block necessary reforms, or failed to live up to its own claims of modernization, was laid bare. The armed forces had been talking of fundamental reform for years – yet had largely resisted it, in everything from command, through training, to the basic functionality of kit. As the CGS Gen Nikolai Makarov dryly put it, 'It is impossible not to notice a certain gap between theory and practice.' Notably, Gen Makarov was scathing about the problem of finding suitable command personnel:

In order to find one person at the rank of lieutenant-colonel, colonel, or general who could ably command troops, it was necessary to search one-by-one through the armed forces, because the full-time commanders who were sitting around leading 'paper regiments and divisions' simply were not in a condition to resolve issues that arose during the Five-Day War. And when you did send them troops and equipment, they were simply confused, and some even refused to execute their assigned tasks.

This was perhaps ungenerous, given that the CGS had not exactly distinguished himself during the conflict, but it was not wholly inaccurate. Certainly, the forces had often made heavy weather of basic inter-unit cooperation, and were thus especially vulnerable to Georgian ambushes and counter-attacks – such as the one that left Gen Khrulyov trapped and seriously wounded during the street-fighting in Tskhinvali. The Georgians could often simply move, re-form and respond more quickly than their Russian opponents.

Advances were often plotted on outdated maps, and with little if any input from electronic or human intelligence-gathering or aerial reconnaissance. (The GRU would suffer a significant political backlash for their perceived failings in this regard.) Especially in the early stage of the war, the Russians were moving into action with minimal (at best) situational awareness of where the enemy were. When they did engage, they could usually only communicate vertically with over-burdened command staffs, not laterally with other units. They found that not only could they often not talk to each other, but they

Russian tanks dug in after the end of active hostilities. They may be festooned with reactive-armor canisters, but reportedly many of these were in fact empty. (Igor Gavrilov/ Laski Diffusion /Getty Images)



could not talk to aircrews above them, both of which failures contributed to ‘friendly fire’ incidents. All told, of the six aircraft Russia lost in the war, three were casualties of friendly fire. In addition (although technically after the end of hostilities), on August 16 two helicopters were lost when a Border Troops Mi-8MTKO hit an Mi-24 from the 487th Helicopter Regt as the former made a night landing at Ugardanta. The gunship was knocked onto its side and heavily damaged when ammunition on board caught fire, and one crewman was killed.

The lack of adequate real-time intelligence also exacerbated the problem of delivering air attacks and land-based fires on anything but fixed targets. The Russians made considerable use of *Tochka-U* and *Iskander* missiles (up to 20 of the former and two of the latter), but these could only be used against towns, airfields, and the like, not against mobile targets. Likewise, although the versatile Su-25 was effective in hunting down troop concentrations, and was able to shift from one target to another that seemed more tempting, this flexibility was often limited by the hidebound attitudes of commanders who valued completing the assigned mission above doing something potentially more useful.

There were serious problems with breakdowns and malfunctions of everything from communications systems to vehicles. The Russians only lost three tanks and around 20 other armored vehicles in combat, but they suffered much greater losses to accidents and breakdowns. Many 58th Army vehicles never even made it to Ossetia, either because they would not start, or because they broke down on the way. Indeed, the army commander’s own vehicle reportedly would not move at first, and then only made 50m before its muffler fell off – hardly an auspicious omen.

Given that surprise and convenience both dictated that the Russian intervention be conducted – as regards the regular Ground Forces troops, at least – by nearby SKVO formations, this meant using relatively low-priority units that had not undergone recent modernization. Most of the 58th Army’s IFVs were various incarnations of the dated BMP-1 (first fielded in 1966), and perhaps two-thirds of its tanks were early 1980s-vintage T-62Ms and



Even after a war, life goes on. Ten days after the peace agreement, a young girl pushes her bicycle past the remnants of a Georgian rocket fired into Tskhinvali. (Dmitry Kostyukov/AFP via Getty Images)

T-72B1s. Although the relative handful of T-72BAs deployed were fitted for advanced reactive armor able to defeat man-portable AT weapons, in practice the canisters to hold the explosive charges meant to disrupt incoming warheads were usually empty. Half the bombs dropped on Kopitnari and Senaki airfields failed to explode, and all veterans of the war have similar tales to recount of inadequate or malfunctioning kit.

Again, there were basic failures of training. Although most of the troops deployed against Georgia were so-called *kontraktniki* – volunteers serving on contract – these notional professionals often showed little greater skill or aptitude than conscripts. Almost as many Russian casualties were actually sustained in road crashes and other accidents as from Georgian artillery. Neither were ‘friendly fire’ incidents limited to aircraft; there were also numerous cases in which Russian units fired on each other due to poor communications or fire discipline. Some units also expended their entire basic load of ammunition in just 12 hours, and, since resupply was every bit as haphazard as everything else, they consequently had to be rotated out of harm’s way. In the middle of a battle, this could have disastrous consequences. The commander of a tank platoon admitted that he lost two of his T-72s in Upper Nikozi because ‘we simply ran out of ammunition, and they surrounded us with grenade launchers.’

Ironically enough, none of this would prove truly unwelcome to Defense Minister Serdyukov and ColGen Makarov, who had been looking for an opportunity to force a recalcitrant high command to accept painful but overdue reforms. In October 2008, Serdyukov announced the ‘New Look’ defense reform program, which would entail reducing the total size of the armed forces to one million by 2012, switching the basic building block of the military from the division to the brigade, and – perhaps explaining that recalcitrance – making substantial cuts among the ‘top brass’.

Finally, it is worth noting that this was also one of the first modern wars in which cyber-attacks and information operations were integrated into the military campaign. Moscow employed hackers to disrupt both Georgian communications, and the country’s active efforts to solicit international

A column of Russian SP artillery leaves Gori on August 22, heading back to Tskhinvali. (Dimitar Dilkoff /AFP via Getty Images)



support. Such activities would later become much more extensive, and the Georgian conflict foreshadowed the 21st century's slide into blended kinetic and informational wars.

AFTERMATH

Russian gains

As mentioned above, on August 12 President Medvedev announced a ceasefire, and countersigned a formal end to the conflict on August 16. Western leaders had been seeking an end to the fighting, and, given that they were unwilling either to challenge Russia head-on or to provide the direct assistance Saakashvili was requesting, ultimately Moscow was able to all but dictate the final terms. The peace negotiated by French President Sarkozy essentially legitimized South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's new status as independent republics. Saakashvili was naturally loath to accede to this, but, since it was the price Moscow demanded for withdrawing its troops into the rebel regions, he had little choice. Grumbling that the 'evil' Russians were '21st-century barbarians,' Saakashvili signed the documents.

The Kremlin had already prepared the ground back in April, when the newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* had quoted a Russian diplomat as saying that:

The Ministry for Foreign Affairs recommended that the Russian President recognize Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence under two circumstances: either when Georgia begins accession to NATO, or if it conducts aggression towards these two republics.

However artificially provoked, the latter condition had clearly been met, and, on August 26, Moscow formally recognized both as independent states (a decision that would be formally rejected by the international community, without affecting Moscow's behaviour). In fact, of course,



Russia was acquiring military protectorates that occupied one-fifth of Georgia's territory, and the consequent opportunity to cause more trouble for Tbilisi whenever it wanted. Both regions' borders began to be controlled by permanent posts of the Russian FSB Border Troops 'in collaboration' with the locals. Moscow also established a permanent, institutionalized military presence in both regions. In Abkhazia, the 7th Military Base outside Gudauta was formed from the 131st Separate MR Bde, strengthened with new T-90A tanks and long-range S-300PS SAM systems, while the Black Sea Fleet also began operating small patrol vessels out of Ochamchire. In North Ossetia, the 693rd MRR of the 19th MR Div became the nucleus for the 4th Military Base, with additional forces including a rocket artillery battery.

Having lost no more than 74 dead (figures are contradictory, and some put it in the low 60s), Moscow clearly considered this a bargain, especially as the Georgians had lost more than twice as many, along with large amounts of matériel either destroyed or captured. The approximately 90 South Ossetian fighters and one Abkhazian who also died did not seem to feature in the Russian calculations.

Perhaps wisely, Saakashvili had waited until after he had won a second presidential term before launching this war, but his political standing inevitably suffered. In 2009 the opposition staged mass protests, which Saakashvili claimed were intended to culminate in a mutiny in the Army; others hinted that Moscow was behind them. As it was, his party lost its parliamentary majority in 2012 to tycoon Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian

A Georgian Army BMP-1; the drive to replace or upgrade such dated Soviet-legacy equipment only increased after the war. (Cliff Volpe/Getty Images)



South Ossetian troops in the hills outside Tskhinvali. The Five-Day War may have won them *de facto* independence, but the risk that some day Georgian troops will be back remains a constant worry, and they continue to train and re-arm. (Kazbeck Basayev/AFP via Getty Images)

Dream coalition, and Saakashvili relinquished the presidency the following year. Although Ivanishvili adopted a much more conciliatory stance towards Russia – and Moscow certainly put considerable overt and covert effort into undermining Georgian sovereignty – nonetheless the country has continued to look westwards. Ivanishvili reaffirmed the commitment to eventual NATO membership; Georgian forces continued to re-equip to NATO standards, and during 2009–2021 they contributed to NATO-led missions in Afghanistan.

Georgians in Afghanistan

In 2009, Tbilisi sent a company of the 23rd Lt Inf Bn to serve first with the French contingent and then with US troops. From 2010 it was fielding a full battalion, the largest contingent from a country outside NATO. The Georgians served predominantly in the ever-troublesome Helmand Province, and at their peak provided two light infantry battalions; in the period 2010–14 they suffered 31 dead and 435 wounded. When ISAF ended its combat operations and was replaced with the Resolute Support Mission tasked primarily with training, Georgia continued to play a disproportionate role, with 860 soldiers in-country. Like other participants, Georgia withdrew its forces when the Afghan National Army collapsed in June 2021, by which time a total of more than 20,000 Georgian soldiers had served in Afghanistan.

As for Moscow, it had demonstrated the will and capacity to use a short, sharp dose of military violence to punish a recalcitrant neighbor in what Medvedev called Russia's 'sphere of privileged interests.' The war also prompted a military reform program that appeared to give it much more capable forces than in 2008. Arguably, this impression – reinforced by success in a small-scale campaign in Crimea, and an expedition to support President Assad in Syria – would lead Moscow into the dramatic miscalculation that was the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, ongoing at the time of writing. In which case, perhaps Tbilisi got the last laugh after all.

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